

The Lost Soldiers

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The Lost Soldiers

by [denimbeans](#)

Summary

Bucky didn't quite believe the email when Shuri first showed it to him. Why on Earth would Tony Stark agree to house him? Not only that, but to help him?

But if there was a chance, no matter how small, that he could get rid of the Soldier...

Well, he just had to take it.

Percy's wasn't sure what to think.

On one hand, he feels for Bucky Barnes. The man's been through hell and back; something Percy knows all too much about.

But on the other, he's a ticking time bomb. Percy wants to help him, he really does. But if the Soldier made a reappearance...

Percy knew he'd have no choice but to put his duty first.

To kill James Barnes without hesitation.

Prologue

Chapter Notes

HERE WE GO, GUYS!

book two, up!

i got so much planned. you guys better buckle up.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

PROLOGUE

Wednesday, May 23, 2017

11:03 AM

WSC Headquarters, DC

Willa Hanover was many things. Stern, decisive, fair. But most importantly, she was efficient. She made the logical choices, the ones conducive to building for a better tomorrow.

She stared down at the Council floor. Perseus Jackson sat at the simple, dark wood table, his posture perfectly straight, his chin parallel to the floor. He was a man of few words, businesslike and blunt. Something she could appreciate. He made no time for jokes, for offhand comments, never tried to go out of his way to prove a point.

I have nothing to prove, his face screamed.

His voice never wavered when he spoke, he took objections and arguments in stride. Clean-cut, accomplished, adaptive.

Maybe Willa was biased, but she was confident that he was exactly the man they were looking for.

“Your resume is quite impressive, Mr. Jackson,” She notes, paging through the stapled document.

He dipped his chin in a short nod, leaning down slightly into the microphone. “Thank you.”

“You have worked for the Council before,” A touch of surprise in her voice. But it was right there, on the very top of the first page. “Our specialized Hazardous Search and Rescue Department.” Another nod.

Willa quietly closed the manilla folder. “You joined up almost straight out of high school. You invested two years of your life into leading that team. Commendation after commendation, you were getting promoted left and right. You were on the fast track to a great career. Why did you leave?”

Jackson was silent for a second, his brow furrowed. He brought his hands up onto the desk, folded. “The Battle of New York.” He said quietly. Willa’s eyebrows raised. “When the Chitauri came down, I wasn’t there.” He continued. “I was halfway across the world, so far away from civilization with my search team that I didn’t even know my apartment building had been leveled until I came back and saw it myself.”

He blinked a couple times, then looked back towards her. “I personally spent three months pulling bodies out of the rubble. People of all ages, genders, races, socioeconomic backgrounds. There was no discrimination in that attack. When the Chitauri came, they came for all of us.” Jackson’s voice got stronger, lost the slight waver. “And we never even saw them coming.”

“I got offered a job with SHIELD. I... I knew that’s what they dealt with. Aliens, and all that. I wanted to be ready. If another attack came, I wanted to do whatever I could to stop it before it happened. I never wanted to have to spend that much time moving bodies, ever again. And SHIELD was my way to that.”

Willa cleared away any emotion from her throat. “That’s very commendable, Mr. Jackson.” Her voice was thick. The Chitauri invasion weighed heavily on everybody’s minds, still. You couldn’t walk a block in New York without stumbling across some form of memorial. It was a dark stain on their history; not a single person escaped unaffected.

He gave her a short, barely there smile. There wasn’t much heart in it, but she couldn’t really blame him. “That’s kind of you to say.”

“Of course. And you worked for SHIELD for... how long, exactly?”

“Almost three years. I quit in December of 2014.” The answer was automatic, probably something he had been asked many times. Willa made a quick note in the margins, brow furrowing. “December of 2014, you said?”

“Yes.”

Willa looked up at him, scrutiny evident in her gaze. “The attack at the Triskelion and the uncovering of SHIELD’s infiltration both happened... not even a month later. Your track record at SHIELD was impressive. Not a single failed mission, up until the very end. Your last field operation.”

Jackson raised a single dark brow. He leaned forward to the mic. “Is that a question, Councilwoman?”

“Yes it is, Mr. Jackson. Up until then, you were spotless. Glowing recommendations. You left just weeks before SHIELD was taken down from the inside. I have your last mission report, here. It is vastly different from the ones of your team lead and fellow agents, is it not?”

A moment of silence. Jackson seemed to be collecting himself, a pinched look on his face. He looked almost... angry. Oddly enough, though, it didn’t seem to be directed at her. “I don’t quite appreciate what you are inferring, Councilwoman.”

Willa opened her mouth to speak, but Jackson rolled on. “I don’t appreciate it, but I understand it. I left SHIELD after I raised alarms about infiltrations, about spies, and nobody listened to me. I left SHIELD after I found out all the shady shit they were doing. I left SHIELD after my own team leader attempted to murder me in cold blood because I stuck my nose where I shouldn’t have.” His voice was hard, his face dark. “I left SHIELD because I weighed my options. I knew something was wrong, but I cannot help those who willingly, *eagerly*, blind themselves in their hubris.”

She blinked a couple times, letting his statement sink in. Councilman Broz stood. “You knew that SHIELD had been infiltrated, and did nothing about it?”

Jackson turned in his seat, facing the man. “All due respect, Councilman, what should I have done? Alert my superiors? The ones who tried to kill me? Should I have caused a ruckus and brought it past SHIELD? To whom? Look around you, Councilman.” Jackson gestured around the room. “More than half of these chairs are empty. Hydra plants in your own chamber, and you didn’t notice. At that point, there was not a single person, no authority, I could put my complete faith in. Not my faith, or my life. Can you blame me?”

Broz stared at him for a long moment then gave a slow nod. “I suppose not, Mr. Jackson.” He conceded, lowering himself back into his chair. Jackson watched him for a second, then turned

back to face Willa.

“If you check that mission report, Councilwoman, you’ll see it was signed off by Brock Rumlow. Crossbones himself.”

She looked down at the small pile of papers. Indeed, in bold, dark letters, *B. Rumlow* was stamped on the top, sighed at the bottom. It was odd, seeing something so innocuous signed by a man like Crossbones. A simple, blocky signature that was more than just ink on paper. A coverup, one of the largest in US history. And Perseus Jackson resided right in the middle of it.

Willa looked back at him. “You really believe this would work, Mr. Jackson?”

The man raised a brief brow at the sudden change of subject, but took it in stride. “I do, Councilwoman. And I am not an optimistic person, nor do I waste my time with meaningless assurance. These are people who have been tried and tested time and time again. They can handle it, and so can I.” He said firmly. “I am confident when I say my unit is the best option.”

He held her gaze when he spoke, and continued to after he finished. It was clear he had nothing more to say, that he had made his position very obvious. Suddenly, Willa’s mouth curved into a smile so slight it was barely noticeable.

It was so silent in the Council chamber you could hear the breeze outside, the clacking of heels on the tile on the other side of the door. Willa took her time to neatly stack all of the papers together, to place them back into the folder from whence they came. The Council watched with bated breath, tension emanating from their bodies.

Jackson, in comparison, was startlingly calm. Perfectly poised, letting nothing show. Willa nodded to herself. That right there, was the man for the job.

She cleared her throat. “All in favor?”

Not a single hand went unraised.

Percy adjusted his tie as he strode out of the heavy, ornate doors. That morning when he had gotten dressed, he had let out a huff of laughter. The last time he had put on a suit and tie, he had gotten

half a round pumped into his gut on live television.

He only just turned the corner when he was accosted by Lee. Her grip was firm on his wrist in a second, dragging him down the hall, all the way to a smaller door. She stopped right before opening it, turning to face Percy.

“That,” She said seriously, “Was *so* cool.”

Then she shouldered the door open, pulling Percy in with her. He blinked a couple times as she closed the door behind them. He could feel thick plumbing pipes all around them, some of them not even hidden by walls. The smell of a mild soap filled his nostrils. Slowly, he turned to the assembled group.

“Are you guys hiding,” he said slowly, “in the fucking bathroom?”

Mal gave a sheepish shrug. “We were worried they might try to separate us otherwise.”

Percy rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I assume all of you were eavesdropping?”

Lee rolled her eyes. “Of course we were.” Daniel, next to her, pushed his glasses up. “That was seriously badass, dude. Broz looked like he was going to shit himself!” Percy just rolled his eyes, turning back to the door.

“Out of the bathroom, all of you. You’re supposed to be adults, remember?”

Surprisingly, the name Lee came up with stuck. SWORD, the Sentient World Observation and Response Department, was now officially registered as a Council unit, under the leadership of the newly instated Commander Perseus Jackson.

Percy, with her input, had personally selected all of the unit members. After being vetted extensively by him, Tony, and Mrs. O’Leary, they amounted to seven in total.

The first, besides Lee, was one Daniel Campbell. A tech analyst who had been sent on occasional field operations. Then Bridgette Lehey, from legal. Aspen Anev was third, with their extensive security background. Ross Bunmi and Mal Tanuk came last, a strategist and liaison respectively.

All of them were ex-SHIELD, having narrowly escaped death when the file dump happened. Both Lee and Daniel were undercover when Romanov uploaded everything, and had made it by the skin of their teeth. So when Tony Stark offered each of them jobs, they all readily accepted. And when Percy came with them with a new one, none of them thought twice.

Percy had known all of them in passing; none of them were high-ranking field operatives like him, but they occasionally crossed paths. It was getting harder to ignore the fact that, as loud and child-like as some of them were, he was actually growing to like them.

Which led to times like this.

“No, no! Something badass, like, uh... fuck, I dunno.”

“Knife.”

“What?”

“My codename. It will be Knife.”

“Mal, what the fuck is wrong with you?”

Percy stifled a laugh into his shoulder. The unit was sprawled out across the couches in the lounge, none of them sitting in a normal human way.

Lee was upside down, his feet over the back of the couch. Ross was next to him, one foot on the cushion and one on the floor, hunched over a bag of chips. The next couch over, Aspen was manspreading like there was no tomorrow, confining Bridgette to perch on the arm of the loveseat. Daniel was sprawled over the longest couch, a bowl of popcorn resting on his stomach. Behind him, Mal sat, knees up, on the back of the couch like a gargoyle.

They were bickering and throwing food, lazily slapping someone if they disagreed with them. (And they were close enough. Percy doubted any of the agents planned on moving anytime soon.)

He cleared his throat, leaning against the doorway.

Six pairs of vaguely guilty eyes snapped to him. Except for Lee, who he didn't think was capable of remorse. "'Sup.'" Aspen offered.

Percy raised a single brow. Ross rolled her eyes. "Well, come sit down." Then paused to look around at the occupied seats. Unprompted, Mal roughly kicked Daniel off the couch, but made no room to get off the back. Instead, she just gestured to the now free space.

From the carpet, face down, Daniel called out, "I'm fine."

"Yeah, whatever. It's important stuff time!" Ross declared. Her eyes shone. "Code names." She whispered.

Percy's face immediately soured. "Gods, please no." He was ignored.

"Ok, ok, ok. We decided that Aspen gets to be Wraith and Bridgette is Archangel, right? And so I'm Foxglove, and Lee called dibs on Echo. Daniel wants to be Ace, but we think that's lame. And will you please tell Mal that her codename can't be *fucking* Knife?"

Mal made a face. "No, but consider this. It's self-explanatory. Like, *oh, what are you gonna do?* And then BOOM! Knife." Bridgette smacked her face into her palm so hard it made Percy wince.

"I'm glad you guys are having fun." He said dryly.

Ross flashed him an upside down grin. "We are, thank you. And we figured yours out too!"

Gods above. "Oh?"

Ross nodded proudly. Percy sighed slightly, and slowly lowered himself into the newly vacated

couch, stepping over Daniel, who seemed rather alright with being on the floor. He supposed he did need one, now. Deathstroke... beside the fact that Deathstroke was a mercenary wanted by at least a few dozen countries, Percy knew he could never put that mask on again. "Alright, let's hear it."

Lee's eyes gleamed. "Sentinel."

Percy blinked a few times. Before he could get a word out, Ross rambled forward. "Cause, like, you watch over shit. 'n you like to stand in doorways and be all ominous and shit, give people fuckin' heart attacks."

His eyebrows met his hairline. "Is the blood rushing to your head, or are you drunk?"

"Yes."

Percy flashed a wordless thumbs up.

Surprisingly, Percy actually ended up taking a liking to Sentinel. They also insisted on giving Mrs. O'Leary her own alias.

("*What if her identity gets to the public?*" Daniel had lamented.

"*She's a dog, Dan.*")

Quite honestly, Percy wouldn't be surprised if they had somehow legally registered her as an agent.

And so SWORD was officially a team. Commanded by Sentinel, seconded by Echo and Foxglove, with Ace as their tech operative and Archangel and Wraith as their liaisons and extra muscle, and Tremor (Bridgette persuaded Mal to pick something *other* than Knife) as their mission control. Along with Clifford The Big Red Dog.

You know, Percy was *really* reconsidering this whole unit thing.

Their first mission was simultaneously a success and a disaster at the same time. A success because they retrieved their target with no collateral, no witnesses. A complete failure because Percy probably had a stress ulcer by now.

Daniel found everything they needed in under ten minutes, a startling feat, and spent the rest of the time playing tetris. Mal brought a supply of twinkies to the stakeout but successfully lured a suspect into an alley with them like a fucking breadcrumb trail. Aspen and Bridgette spent the entire time holding hands but choked a man out together. Lee spent an hour retelling the entire history of Batman to the suspect Mal detained, but he finally broke if only to get her to *stop talking*. Ross made so many filthy jokes that he infiltrated an underground criminal ring without a hitch, ‘just because the Boss thought he was funny’.

It was horrible. Fury would’ve hated every single one of them.

It was no wonder Percy fit in so well.

(He would take the fact that Mrs. O’Leary’s codename was shortened to Red as a victory. He needed it.)

Chapter End Notes

percy's SWORD teammates will be fairly minor OC's, but, real quick anyways:

Bridgette Lehey—she/her

Aspen Anev—they/them

Daniel Campbell—he/him

Ross Bunmi—she/he/they (genderfluid)

Lee Van Keppel—she/he/they (any pronouns)

Mal Tanuk—she/they

you won't be seeing much of them, but i just thought i'd clarify.

also, happy new years, guys!

The Email

Chapter Summary

Percy woke up drenched in ice cold sweat.

He threw off the heavy blankets, pulling himself into a sitting position. The demigod drew his legs up to his chest, resting his forehead on his knees. His breath was shaky, ragged, and made his chest ache with every inhale. The tower was cold during the nights—something that never bothered Percy, but now, he couldn't get rid of the goosebumps.

Chapter Notes

alright, getting into the actual story! lets go!!!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wednesday, July 2, 2017

2:43 AM

Stark Tower, NY

Percy woke up drenched in ice cold sweat.

He threw off the heavy blankets, pulling himself into a sitting position. The demigod drew his legs up to his chest, resting his forehead on his knees. His breath was shaky, ragged, and made his chest ache with every inhale. The tower was cold during the nights—something that never bothered Percy, but now, he couldn't get rid of the goosebumps.

Most nights had been like this—ever since the Doctor.

Ever since he had brutally massacred over a hundred people.

Percy clenched his fists to keep his hands from shaking. His nails bit into the scarred, calloused flesh of his palms, but he couldn't bring himself to care. The pain was sharp, grounding, reminding

himself that he was actually here.

He could still feel it, when he went to sleep. How he sensed every cell in their bodies, every drop of moisture on their skin, how fast their hearts beated. They were so *scared*. Scared of *him*. He relived it every night, how he had grabbed hold of the water, how he made them drop their guns in synchronization like they were his puppets. How their bodies fell to the ground like he had cut their strings when he killed them.

His medication had gotten upped again. It hadn't been this bad since he was a teenager.

Percy squeezed his eyes shut, steadying his breathing. He thought the nightmares would stop, the ones about the brick building, at least. It was horribly naive of him. He had lived this life long enough to know that the nightmares never stopped—they just got new material.

If he stilled for a second, he could practically feel the Doctor's hands, so fucking *cold*, on him.

On the other side of the bed, Mrs. O'Leary stretched in her sleep, her paws flexing. It was still pitch black out—she wouldn't be up for a while. As quietly as possible, Percy swung his feet over the edge of the bed, his socks hitting the carpet without a sound.

He crept out of his room, past his little living room and kitchen, and then out of his apartment and down the hallways of Stark Tower.

Like he said, most nights had been like this—he wandered around aimlessly until he either tired himself out or daylight came. Maybe at one point, he would've trained instead of walked. But lately...every time he used his powers, he thought about pushing at that barrier. The strong line he had set between his powers, the ones that were okay the ones that were *not*. Every time he cleaned up a spill, froze an ice cube, filled Mrs. O'Leary's bowl without getting up, he was reminded about how easily he could be doing something else, something not as harmless.

But another part of him couldn't help but whisper that there was no point. Why limit himself? He had these abilities, he should use them. Every time, the voice sounded like his own, but changed, morphed, into one he would never forget—

Percy stopped walking. "I'm not down there anymore." He whispered aloud. "I'm *not*."

He would never say it to *anyone*, not even Annabeth, but sometimes he felt like he still was. He felt like he would wake up to air that burned to breathe, to no sky, to monsters hunting him down at every turn. That all of this was some sort of trauma-induced dream, that he had pushed his ability too far and had finally snapped.

Down there, morals didn't matter. Percy had just wanted to live, to get back to the surface. He knew, as soon as he understood what would happen if he didn't make it up to the top, what would happen to Annabeth's soul if it remained tethered down there, that he would do whatever it took.

Akhlys was different.

Percy had been walking for what might've been days, his fingers cramped around the hilt of Riptide. When the Goddess had reached out, poison dripping from her fingers, and Percy *felt* it, he wondered. He could control water, both fresh and salt, so why not something else? Everything had water in it, after all. There was no water in Tartarus, so he would just have to make some.

But that wasn't possible—that wasn't supposed to happen.

The other part of him, the one that had been born the day Gabe Ugliano walked into his life, disagreed. It whispered that Tartarus had its own rules. The air was rancid and the sun didn't exist, fire was drinkable and demigods could be turned into hazy corpses, the ground was the body of a dark God and Percy was heading right for his heart. Why couldn't he just...use his powers on whatever he could get his hands on?

And he did. He made Akhlys cry and sob and beg for her life, all with a twist of his lips. He slaughtered monsters whenever they got close to him—whether through the sting of Celestial Bronze, the force of one of the Underworld rivers, or their own bodies bursting by virtue of the abomination that was Percy Jackson.

He hadn't told a living soul exactly what happened down there. Only Annabeth did he tell just the slightest bit of it. But only once, because she had looked at him nervously, and asked if he knew that most of Poseidon's children were born monstrous.

Her words sounded cruel, but they both knew it needed to be said. That was one thing he always appreciated about Annabeth—she didn't really beat around the bush. It just reinforced something he had been wondering since Tyson got claimed. What made a monster a monster?

Percy clenched his fists. Was it something you could obtain? Like Chryasor, who looked so, so human? Could Percy one day get a papercut and have golden dust sprinkle out instead of crimson?

Deep down, Percy knew this line of questioning would get him nowhere. Just a spiral downwards, never ending. But nonetheless, he kept finding himself headed that way.

He shook his head and kept walking.

Friday, April 20th

4:02 PM

The Hub, NY

Tony was worried. About Percy, about Peter, about SWORD, the Accords, BARF, Barnes, even himself.

But mostly Percy.

Ever since the Doctor, he had been different. Which made sense, it really did. Tony would never fully be able to understand what happened to Percy those few days. He knew that. One thing, though, he could understand, was grief. Grief, and guilt.

Tony never really knew Captain Johnson. But Percy did, and that was enough.

He didn't really know how close they were until a few weeks after Percy woke up. The demigod had leaned against the back of the couch and spoke, his eyes wet. They had met back when Percy was still with his search and rescue team. Unlikely friends, but they worked. When Percy quit, she was the one who helped him start his new mercenary career, and when she got promoted, Percy pulled in a few contacts to get her information when she needed it.

Friends for *years*, and Percy hadn't even been able to attend her funeral.

The engineer sighed and looked down.

They really couldn't catch a break, could they?

His StarkPad sat innocently in his lap, the screen dimming from lack of use. Tony didn't bother to try and stop it from shutting off. He just thunked it down onto the SWORD conference room coffee table and leaned back onto the couch.

Truthfully, he didn't really know how Percy had set it all up so fast. A surprise visit from Fury had turned into talking to some old friends, which turned into petitioning the Council, which turned into whatever the hell they were now. Daniel liked to call them a specialized response team—Bridgette called them a pain in the ass.

Tony was a little surprised how easily he got along with them. Bridgette was the same kind of loving belligerent that Pepper was, and Daniel was easygoing and had an unashamedly loud laugh. The other team members were similarly friendly. The most surprising one was Percy, though. How effortlessly he took control, the speed at which he made decisions in the field. Without that kind of command, Tony wasn't sure that SWORD would have made it past a concept. Though, he supposed, that could be expected a fucking *veteran demigod*.

The name was pretty damn cool, too. Lee was the one who had come up with it. *Sentient World Observation and Response Department*. It was a mouthful, but he had looked so proud when he said it that Percy just let it slide.

Percy and the team had left early that morning to check something out down south, somewhere in Costa Rica. They were due to be back anytime soon, but Tony had gotten there early, so he had raided Mal's tangerine supply and went over some work on his StarkPad.

It was another 20 minutes before he heard the footsteps coming through the front door. He could hear Ross and Daniel yelling at each other—something about how to pronounce the word 'egg'? Tony honestly didn't want to know.

Percy walked into the room first. He was dressed normally, his suit in the duffel over his shoulder. He was smiling and rolling his eyes at his team members, before catching Tony. "Oh. Hey. Didn't know you were coming." He greeted, ignoring Mal's outraged "*Are those my oranges?*"

Tony gave him a short smile. "Surprise. I got news."

Percy's smile faded. He let the bag go, and it hit the hardwood floors with a dull thunk. It was like a mask had been pulled over his face; his posture straightened, mouth relaxed into a straight line, his eyes lost that little crinkle of mirth in the corner.

Recently, it had been something Tony had come to hate. How Percy just seemed to separate his lives like that, pulling one mask over the other.

And maybe that was a reflection of Tony himself—Gods knew he had been doing that kind of thing for years. The cocky, smarmy billionaire who always had to be the smartest one in the room. The way he smiled like he didn't have a care in the world, like he didn't have four inches of metal in his heart.

The team seemed to get the hint and all wondered out. (Mal shot him a vicious look first, though.)

Percy waited a moment until their footsteps faded. He made his way over to the couch and cautiously sat down. "What's up?"

Before he answered, Tony gave Percy a long look. The long hours and lack of sleep were broadcasted right on his face—the circles under his eyes could've carried a quinjet. He just looked drawn, worn out. Tony sighed and tapped on his StarkPad. There was no use skirting around the problem. That was probably the last thing Percy would appreciate right now.

"I got an email from Shuri." Percy raised a single brow, but kept silent.

Tony took a deep breath. "It's Barnes. He's doing better, improving every day."

The green-eyed man leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest. "I'm assuming there's a *but* here."

He received a mirthless smile in return. "Isn't there always?" He glanced down at his StarkPad once more.

"Shuri isn't a brain surgeon. BARF won't do much in her hands. She either....she wants me to come to Wakanda,—"

“Like hell you are!” Percy burst in, eyebrows drawn together. Tony gave him a light look at the interruption, then continued. “She wants me to come to Wakanda, *or* have Barnes come here.”

The demigod blinked a couple times. “Like, come to the Tower? Seriously?”

Tony sighed. “I know, it’s just...*BARF works*, Percy. I know it could get rid of the trigger words for good. He needs help and I can *do* it.”

Percy leaned forward. “Tony...I’m sure we could figure out another way.” The engineer shook his head. “No, no. This is for the best. But,” he scanned Percy’s face for any discernible emotion. “If you aren’t comfortable with him here, I’ll take option one. You live here too.”

Percy frowned, but spoke with a startling intensity. “There’s no way I’m letting you go all the way to Wakanda without any backup. At least here we can keep an eye on him. Keep your potential enemies closer, right?”

Tony felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. “Are you sure?”

Percy’s eyes were focused down onto the floor, his thumb rubbing over the back of his knuckles. It was a nervous habit he had picked up recently. Just back and forth over the curved scar on his first finger. “Yeah, Tony. It’s...” he sighed. “It’ll be fine.”

He didn’t really sound like he was talking to Tony. He chose not to comment, and just bumped the mercenary lightly with his elbow. “Yeah. It will be.”

If he noticed it, Percy didn’t comment on how Tony’s heart skipped too many beats to sound sure of itself.

Tuesday, April 24th

8:32 PM

Stark Tower, NY

At some point, he would definitely regret this. Hours hunched over a worktable couldn't be good for him at *all* —but this was important, all right?

The idea had come to him in the middle of another late terror-fueled, sleep-avoiding night with Percy. The two of them had just taken to sitting in the kitchen, at the island, in silence. Sometimes the quiet was nice; time to think, to be comfortable in each other's presence.

Other times it wasn't. Those were the times when Percy got that far away look in his eyes, like he really wasn't there sitting next to Tony. Like he was worlds away.

Tony hesitated, his hand holding the tweezers pausing. For all Tony knew, he might've been.

Percy hadn't touched on his past much. He gave them a brief, SparkNotes-esque runthrough of his life before he joined SHIELD. In fact, most of what he had said hadn't even been about himself—he spoke of Gods and monsters, Camps and demigods. But next to nothing about himself. Normally, Tony would've pried. That was who he was—he liked knowing things.

But since Percy had just had his body hijacked by a deranged doctor with a wonder drug, accidentally killed a bunch of people, then went into an eight week-long coma, woke up and found out a close friend of his had died, Tony let him off easy. He was nice like that.

Peter was the one to ask, since Percy was a demigod, he had to have a Godly parent, right? In response, Percy's eyes crinkled. "My mom's a Goddess if I've ever known one, alright."

Neither Tony nor Peter had pressed him about it. Not wanting to talk about your family was something both of them got. Tony wouldn't lie; he was curious. Very. But he knew better than to question him about it.

Decidedly, Tony didn't bring up the man who visited the medbay while Percy was still unconscious. Whoever the man was, he had to have been Percy's father, not that it narrowed anything down. According to his understanding of the Gods, not even gender.

Like previously stated, Tony didn't try to push. But he knew, whatever had happened back in Ontario, because Tony knew he was missing *something*, had been enough to shake Percy. Percy, who was the lone building standing after a storm, unmovable and solid.

Tony flipped his welding mask down.

He knew it was easy to get lost in your own head. Especially when you had seen shit like they had. So during those late nights, where they just sat there, elbows on the cold marble, Tony said nothing. He let Percy sink into his silence, he let Percy be the one to pull himself to the surface.

Monday, April 30th

9:32 PM

Stark Tower, NY

The steady tap of Percy's pointer finger against the desk matched his heart beat for beat.

At first, he never really noticed when he did that. Nesryn had been the one to point it out, actually, during Percy's stint in the infirmary after Gaea. It was a subconscious thing—Percy relaxed, let his whole body breathe with itself, centered around the steady rhythm. Now it was just a habit, when he needed to think.

The paper in front of him was written in ink, this time, but it didn't do much good. It was a little too old to read properly without a struggle. Having FRIDAY dictate it for him would save them both from a headache.

The paper itself smelled like it always did—cardboard, fuel, ozone, and the scent of plants that Percy wasn't familiar with. A small piece of the roundabout journey it had taken to get here, no doubt. Romanoff was thorough. Nobody would be able to trace it unless she wanted them to.

(Or you were either Tony Stark or Percy Jackson. Not much she could do about that one, though.)

As always, the letter was short, brief, straight to the point. Neither of them put much value in pleasantries and white lies about how their days had been.

There's a problem with BARF, isn't there? Shuri has been awfully quiet about the whole thing. Barton and I are the only ones who know about it, but Rogers is getting suspicious. Maximoff is

still pissed, too.

Barnes still has the trigger words, obviously. And Stark doesn't sign off on faulty tech.

What's the deal?

-NR

He and Natasha had, despite their general wariness of each other, always maintained a professional respect between them. Natasha didn't bother to try and disguise her dig for information—something Percy appreciated. The letter was written about a week and a half ago, he estimated, so if the decision about Barnes coming to the tower hadn't reached her yet, it was because Shuri and Barnes had stayed quiet.

Percy wasn't quite sure how to feel about that decision in the first place, much less how much of it to reveal to Romanoff. He knew she didn't tell the other Rogues everything—usually just Barton. He doubted Rogers even knew about all of the letters.

They came sporadically, simple updates from both ends. Nothing super important, but just enough. Percy, after the lengthy conversation with Tony and Peter about his parentage, had suffered through another checkup, then gone straight to his room. Not one, but three of the letters sat on his bed.

The first was a regular update—Romanoff knew that he knew they had fled to Wakanda, and neither of them really acknowledged how or why, for either side. The second had been dated three weeks after the first, with a more tense, brief update. The third had abandoned any pretense and simply asked if he was alright.

Percy wrote back the next day and assured them he was fine. They didn't ask what happened to him, and he didn't tell them.

Whether or not Barnes knew about the semi-regular correspondence was unknown. Another thing neither of them mentioned.

Quite honestly, Percy had no idea how to feel about the guy.

It hadn't been his fault, being the star of the Winter Soldier program. It wasn't his choice to murder Howard and Maria Stark, nor the countless others. It wasn't his choice to be froze and thawed and had his brain turned to mush over 70 years of torture.

Percy was only a little regretful to admit he didn't always think about it that way.

Could you blame him, though? The evidence didn't look great.

But then, over time, Tony let things slip. How in Siberia, Barnes didn't seem to be all that present. How there was a blank, glazed look in his eyes, how he seemed dazed and confused, not in his right mind. Like Barnes wasn't even totally sure what was happening in that bunker. A miracle if he could even remember it clearly, probably.

That had been part of it. But the last piece, the part that pushed Percy over the edge and into the grays of confusion and undeciding had been the Doctor. What was the difference between Barnes and Percy? Neither of them wanted to do what they had done, to cause all that damage, to kill all those people.

Percy hadn't fully understood why Barnes was running, why he fought, when he wasn't the Soldier. But he got it now, because it was the same reason Percy, mostly dead and terrified, had realized that he was in an *incinerator*, and countless demigods had been disposed of like they were trash in that very spot, like they didn't matter, and Percy would probably never get to know their names, who they were, because the Gods surely wouldn't remember their own kids, and Percy had been so angry and so scared and he had just wanted them to *leave*—

So he got it. He got the confusion, the fear, striking out in delirium because you had no idea what was going on.

He felt *bad* for Barnes. Truly. It was pity.

But that didn't change the fact that he was coming to the tower. Percy's home. It didn't change the fact that, though it was unwilling, Barnes was unstable. That if something went wrong, he could hurt Tony or Peter. (Not that they were going to let Peter anywhere near him.) BARF worked, but it took time, multiple sessions spread out so he could recover. And in between any of those, before the trigger words were gone, something could happen.

Sure, call Percy a paranoid bastard. Jumpy, irrational, judgemental. An overly suspicious, cold, heartless asshole with no sympathy. A hypocrite.

But if it came down to it, Percy knew he would have no problems, no hesitations, with putting Barnes down in a *second* .

Chapter End Notes

yeah so percy is Not Doing So Hot.

his opinion of bucky is complicated. his sympathy of what bucky has gone through vs. his need to protect the people he cares about. i figure, adhering to his fatal flaw, his loyalty to tony would overrule his personal feelings and connection to bucky.

The Offer

Chapter Summary

Bucky didn't know why he was so disappointed—he knew better than to not get his hopes up in the first place. Shuri seemed to catch this—she looked over at him and seemed to deflate a little. The frustration was clear on her face, unrelenting determination shining in her dark eyes.

“I’ll try. Promise.” She reassured.

And she had tried. Just not what he expected.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Thursday, July 3, 2017

11:52 AM

Wakandan Royal Palace, Wakanda

Bucky was scared.

Scratch that, he was terrified.

It started a few days ago, when Shuri came into the lab. The princess was gnawing on her lower lip as her eyes scanned the tablet in her hands. Her fingers were tapping out a steady rhythm on the edge, nails making a light clicking noise. Bucky himself was seated on one of the lab tables, the cold metal under his flesh hand. He scanned her face for a minute, brow furrowed. Not finding what he was looking for, Bucky’s shoulders slumped. He sighed. “Nothing?”

Her eyes went up to meet his gaze. Remorsefully, she had shaken her head, eyes sympathetic. “I’m sorry, Sergeant. There’s...I can’t do anything about this. Stark’s work is genius, but I’m not a brain surgeon. I don’t...This is out of my field of expertise.” She explained.

He leaned forward. “But, do you think it could work?”

Shuri set her gaze on the table across from him, where the curiously named BARF sat. Softly, like it was a confession, she whispered, “I don’t know.” The words seemed foreign in her mouth, as if she didn’t quite like the taste of them, mouth pinched.

Bucky nodded. “Alright.” He bit his tongue. He didn't know why he was so disappointed—he knew better than to not get his hopes up in the first place. Shuri seemed to catch this—she looked over at him and seemed to deflate a little. The frustration was clear on her face, unrelenting determination shining in her dark eyes.

“I’ll try. Promise.” She reassured.

And she had tried. Just not what he expected.

Ayo had come and herded him out of his room a few days later. She didn’t answer any of his questions, just dragged him along like the palace was on fire.

Shuri was waiting for him at one of the wide tables in the library. She was leaning her side against one of the many shelves, which seemed to stretch higher than the domed ceiling. Her tablet was once more in hand, and she looked a bit nervous. It was strange—Shuri was never nervous.

Ayo gave her a gentle smile, then at Bucky. She then retreated to the grand doors of the library, leaving Bucky and Shuri alone. He cautiously pulled out a chair and sat across from her. Shuri looked at him for a long moment, and he fought the urge to squirm. Then, without speaking, she put the tablet down, screen-up, and pushed it towards him.

His eyes flickered between her and the offering for a few seconds. Her face revealed nothing. Bucky reached out and brought it closer to him, and started reading.

It was an email chain. Between Shuri and Tony Stark.

Bucky closed his eyes. Every time he thought about Stark, he wanted to cry a little. Over time, it had gotten clearer, the memories of Siberia. Nothing concrete; all he could recall was flashes, loud voices, the feeling of the frozen cement. One thing he could picture perfectly, every time without fail, was Stark lying on the ground as Steve slammed the shield right into his chest. The look on the man’s face...

That was something Bucky would never be able to forget.

But there was no use dwelling on the mistakes he already made. Ayo's voice came to mind, the first time they had sparred together. Truthfully, it wasn't much of a spar—more so her helping him be able to throw a punch without regressing into a full panic. It had been hard—every time he saw a fist swinging towards him his brain went into overdrive. It was always sudden; he would blink and he was back in Moscow or Shanghai or Algeria, a muzzle on his face and a rifle in his hand.

What's done is done. Do not dwell on that which you cannot change.

He hadn't appreciated her words in the moment, but now he got it. He looked up at Shuri, who was watching him expectantly, then back at the screen.

The emails had been happening for a few months, at least. Bucky didn't scroll that far back—he stopped mid swipe at one dated almost two weeks ago. One of the passages jumped out at him;

—Sergeant Barnes will be welcome in Stark Tower for the duration of the treatment. Living spaces, meals, and other needs will be all provided for under the supervision of Ms. Potts and FRIDAY—

Bucky's mouth was suddenly very dry. Shuri calmly rested her elbows on the table. "I promised, didn't I?"

"You did, but Princess," Bucky choked out, "I'm not going to force the man to *live with me*. I doubt he could even stand to be in the same room as me, for hell's sake." He shook his head. "I—I can't put him through that."

Shuri shrugged. "He is the one that offered, funnily enough. If I didn't know the type of man he was, I'd be a little suspicious." She gave him a long look. "He made BARF for this. And if I have anything in common with Tony Stark, it's that we both hate to see our inventions go to waste."

Bucky chewed on the inside of his mouth. The harsh truth was, Bucky really didn't want to get his hopes up. He was confident in the technology itself, sure—from what he knew, Tony was ten times both the man and the inventor as his father was.

And there laid the problem. That father that Bucky had, you know, brutally murdered with his bare hands. Why Stark would want him to be anywhere near him was completely beyond Bucky. But if Stark really meant it...If he really wanted to just get rid of the trigger words, it almost made sense. Grief does strange things to people. Even if it was decades old grief that had been brought up and brutally shoved in his face by a teammate he thought he could trust.

“You really think he’ll help me?” And *shit*, Bucky hated how small his voice sounded.

Shuri just nodded. “I do.”

Bucky scrubbed a hand over his face, through his hair. He leaned back in the chair and stared up at the ceiling. Like everything in Wakanda, it was beautiful. The bookshelves were so tall you couldn’t see the top, and polished wood ladders were bolted to the shelves. The second floor balcony was lit by soft lamps, and cushy chairs dotted the entire room like stars. The ceiling was covered by a mosaic of the night sky, the constellations and their connections spanned out across the domed marble.

Bucky had spent a lot of time in the library. He tried to avoid most of the other Rogues, so when he wasn’t in his room, Shuri’s lab, or with Ayo, he was here. It was calming; the library was probably the least technologically advanced place in Wakanda. Bucky loved to spend time in libraries when he was younger.

When he was a kid, he would visit their local one weekly, like clockwork. He’d spend his precious few minutes scouring the shelves for one he felt was *just* right. Most of the time, he’d end up reading them aloud to a bedridden Steve, only pausing to grab another blanket or wipe the sweat off his friend’s brow.

Though the Wakandan Royal Library was nothing like the tiny, musty one in Brooklyn, it was still a comfort to be surrounded by piles of books and rickety ladders. They had books in what was probably every single language to ever be spoken on Earth. It was nice to branch out from English literature; he spoke countless other languages now. Picking up Spanish, Japanese, or even Latin classics was something so *new*, it was refreshing. If he avoided books in Russian and German... Well, neither the librarian nor Ayo said anything.

Bucky let out a weighted breath from his nose. He nodded, slowly and heavily.

“I’ll...I’ll do it.” He cleared his throat. “I’ll go.”

Shuri smiled.

Thursday, July 3, 2017

12:07 PM

Wakandan Royal Palace, Wakanda

Natasha knew there was something going on. She knew, but also knew better than to try and force an answer out of Barnes and Shuri. Eventually, the curiosity grew too much, and she wrote Jackson.

He responded fairly fast. Natasha, if asked, would deny the sense of relief that washed over her every time she got a letter back. Whatever had happened last November, it had either occupied him enough to stop writing, or...

Natasha dreaded the thought, but she was never one to coddle herself.

Or he got put out of commission long enough that he wasn't able to write back.

She had scoured every news source she had at her fingertips—some legitimate, some not so much. But she couldn't find anything. The only remotely odd thing was a freak storm in Ontario. At first, she had considered the idea that it was caused by some sort of powered individual or object that the Avengers went out to stop. It was conceivable that Jackson would have tagged along—he wasn't an official Avenger, but he was a damn good resource, and she knew Stark was too smart to pass that up. Legal loopholes are a wondrous thing, after all.

The train of thought ended up being dismissed, though. If such a thing happened on an Avengers mission, the public, or at least the Council, would have been informed of it. And Natasha checked. Not a single record was dated of having anything to do with the storm. The Avengers had been in the area a few days prior; now, Natasha did not believe in coincidences. But she spent *days* holed up in her room, sometimes with Clint, but mostly alone. And not *once* did she come up with anything connecting the two events.

(If she really thought about it, Natasha knew of only one person who could have kept something that big under the radar. But why on Earth would Tony Stark go to such lengths to hide a random

Enhanced? It just didn't fit.)

So Natasha started back at square one.

And that was where she stayed.

So instead, she poked around at what was going between Barnes and Shuri. Ayo, one of the Dora Milaje guards, seemed to be in on it too. She had a hunch it was probably something to do with BARF. T'Challa had been the one to tell them about that, actually, and Rogers had been overjoyed. Probably for the best that he didn't know Stark made it. (Because really, who else would name world-changing technology *BARF* ?)

But she noted Barnes' dejected look when he came back from his first session. (Natasha would fully deny the fact that she left a cupcake by his door afterwards. (Clint was teaching her to bake. *What* ? It's not like they had a lot else to do around here.)) Then the second, then the third. After that, the sessions stopped. Until half an hour ago, when Ayo appeared to escort Barnes somewhere.

Jackson's letter sat inside her jacket as she made her way to her room. None of the other Rogues, excluding Clint, knew about her correspondence with Jackson. Which was for the best, because the letter all confirmed that 1) Stark knew where they were hiding, and didn't care, 2) He had made BARF, and 3) Barnes would be leaving Wakanda to go to the tower.

Yes. Shuri needs an expert to operate it. If an agreement is made, Barnes will be shipped out sometime next week.

How are you holding up? I'm surprised Rogers caught on at all. What have you told him? And more importantly, what has he been telling Maximoff?

-PJ

Natasha knew how to read between the lines. An 'expert' on BARF? Well, there was only one of those, and it was Stark himself. She couldn't help the small smile at the second line. Jackson had never really tried to hide his disdain of Rogers, through letters or the few times she interacted with him after he had been pulled from the ice.

Truthfully, Natasha never really knew the reason behind his dislike. Jackson and Rogers had never

met—certainly not long enough to form an opinion. Jackson was better than going off of first impressions or rumors. Though maybe that was Stark's influence?

No. No, Natasha needed to stop thinking like that. Tony wouldn't do something like that, try to force somebody's opinion.

A little ashamed, Natasha ran her thumb over the corner of the page. The paper was nice, hefty printer paper. Another little quirk of Jackson's—he never wrote anything down. He always typed stuff out. She always supposed it was another aspect of his paranoia; Natasha wasn't sure how accurate analysis via handwriting was, but she understood not wanting to take a chance. He was a spy, like her. Analysis was their best asset, and worst enemy.

More often than ever, Natasha found herself thinking of him. It was absurd, really, how much she had been noticing now that she was taking the time to look back. On others, and herself.

A lot about herself.

The Red Room had shaped her. Made her who she was. It taught her that love was for children and loyalty was a lie. That you needed to do whatever as long as you came out on top. The day Clint found her had changed all of that, it had shaken her beliefs down to her very core.

So Natasha compartmentalized. It was the only way a job like hers wouldn't drive her insane. She was either the Black Widow; sneaky, manipulative, stone faced and harsh. Or she was Nat, sitting at a kitchen table on Clint's farm, watching him live a normal life she could never have.

Black Widow or Nat. Never Natasha Romanoff.

The first day she had met Jackson, Fury had been debriefing her in one of the hallways in the Triskelion. They were walking, steps in sync but completely silent, towards his office. Natasha had been stressed—so stressed she barely even spared a glance at the man walking the opposite way.

Well, barely even sparing a glance in her mind. She looked him over—memorizing characteristics, behaviors, a critical eye sweeping over him. It was a habit, brutally taught to her, again and again. But it was helpful. It was one of the many things that made the infamous Black Widow.

Around 6' even, dark skin. Black hair, possible chemical or heat burns on his face. Potential

weakness. High cheekbones, sharp jaw. He walked briskly, posture straight and face composed. One hand in his pocket, twiddling a pen. A nervous habit, maybe. He seemed familiar with where he was going, but Natasha had never seen him before. Someone new, then, but with a good memory.

She noted all this, filed it away, and kept walking.

Then, almost a year later, Fury called her in. Not unusual. But what was new was that there was somewhere else waiting for her.

“Romanoff, meet Jackson.” Fury said briskly. He didn’t wait for them to acknowledge each other, just launched into the mission details. Jackson nodded here and there, but otherwise said nothing. When Fury was done, he sat at his desk, pulled out a thick manilla folder, and handed it to Natasha.

Five hours later, she was sitting on a cargo ferry headed to the Strait of Gibraltar. The trip was long, tedious, and had that steady rocking back and forth that Natasha abhorred. Jackson seemed at ease though—even throughout the storm that hit them a week in.

They were standing belowdecks when it hit. The first big wave had almost knocked Natasha off her feet. She caught herself against a wall, then moved to peer out a porthole. The captain—a burly, grizzled ex-SHIELD agent, gave a booming laugh. “Haven’t got your sea legs yet, ey?”

Natasha hadn’t found it very funny, giving the man a flat look. Jackson cracked a smile, though. He had dimples.

By the time they got off that damn boat, her opinion of him wasn’t very high. He cracked dumb jokes, never seemed serious for a moment. He just didn’t seem to have much of a skill set, honestly. A giant hound, with the odd name Mrs. O’Leary, followed him everywhere. *Everywhere*. Natasha wasn’t exactly sure how the dog got most of those places.

But once they hit port, she reconsidered. They crossed the Portuguese border, the ship captain accompanying them. Border control met them there—and Natasha handed over their falsified identification papers easily. But then one of the agents separated the two from the captain. The captain, who was their expert in the local language.

Natasha spoke fine Spanish, and a little bit of Portuguese. But not enough to be a passable local,

like the papers said. Normally, Fury would have never sent her somewhere where she couldn't blend in. But this was urgent—they needed their best people on it, the sooner the better.

The agent holding her papers was speaking fast, eyes narrowed at her. He was getting agitated, suspicious. Even if they did get past the border, something like this would make them memorable.

She had started formulating an escape plan, when she looked over at Jackson, across the room. He was standing with the other border control agent, casually, relaxed. Like he was uniting with an old friend. The two were smiling, the agent chuckling as he checked over the passport Jackson held out.

The agent handed them back, still smiling, speaking the same rapid Portuguese. And, to her surprise, Jackson responded. Some words she didn't recognize—most likely slang, abbreviations. He spoke like a local, like he belonged. His posture was open, inviting, his smile genuine, eyes crinkled at the corner.

The agent hassling Natasha looked over at his partner as Jackson wandered over. In English, he asked her, "Everything good?" His words were accented—like he really had been learning English overseas with her like the papers said. Natasha made herself relax, angling her body towards him a little, just enough to seem closely familiar with him.

She laughed, and, putting a bit of an accent of her own, she replied, "You tell me." She looked at him with a soft gaze, her lips curling upwards. Because here, she was Nina Rolcaster, a museum curator, who had met her long-term boyfriend on a trip to Portugal, where she decided to stay. Her boyfriend, Tomãs, a history teacher, had gone with her during the summer to visit some of her relatives in America. And now, they were just returning back home, a few weeks before the start of term.

The border agent Jackson had befriended just rolled his eyes and nudged his partner. He said something, which Natasha imagined went along the lines of *stop being such a hardass*. Jackson waved them both goodbye, cracked a quick joke that sent both of them doubled over in laughter, casually slung his arm over Natasha's shoulders, and they were on their way.

She would give it to him—he was a fantastic actor. *Too good*. They kept walking like that for a couple blocks; her arm around his waist and his over her shoulders. Occasionally, they would exchange a word or two, most mostly just walked in comfortable silence. The entire time, she was forcing herself to relax, to lower her hackles. Because there was just *something* about Agent Jackson that made her want to run.

The longer the mission went on, the more her mental profile of him evolved. Natasha had enough self awareness to know that if Jackson hadn't been there with her that day at the border, she probably would've gotten detained right then and there. Honestly, as time went on, he began to remind her of Clint. He had a similar crooked smile, the same utter devotion to his dog, his avid defense of his use of an archaic weapon. Maybe that's why she agreed to finish the mission with him when Fury checked in.

She watched him, silent as ever in her analysis as they boarded the plane in Lisbon. Jackson didn't seem to like flying—he hid it well, but she noticed his minute flinches when the turbulence started. She never brought it up, though. And he never brought up the silent fury in her shoulders when they tracked down child trafficking rings, how *personal* it was to her.

When it came down to it, he just turned his back while she interrogated the suppliers. She didn't thank him, and he didn't expect her to. He didn't thank her when she kept guard by the window of their safehouse while he prayed, and she didn't ask what he was praying for. Both of them just focused on the job—no pleasantries really involved.

Every now and then, when they were in private, she asked him questions, trying to come off as friendly. It was what she did—collected information. He was frustratingly vague about it, though, and quickly shut down whatever conversation she tried to start. It was frustrating, but she let it go.

After the mission was over and they had made it to Korea, she didn't spare him much more thought. Not even when he quit. But now, she couldn't quite stop. After his MIA period, his letter became more clipped, short. Even more professional, if that was possible. Most traces of his dry humor were gone. The letter she had just gotten was an outlier, in all honesty.

Natasha hovered her pen over the piece of notebook paper. All her responses were written in the same notebook, then torn out. It wasn't the neatest presentation, but the notebook was easier to keep hidden than a pile of loose leaf stationary.

It always took her a bit to format the best response. As always, she didn't want to seem too prying. She had already asked all the questions she had about Barnes—well, the ones she wasn't going to ask the man himself, that is. The most recent thing on her mind was the new Council division. Natasha had only been able to brush her metaphorical fingers across the barest whispers of it. She didn't even know what the division was *called*. Honestly, it was a little embarrassing. But she had worked with less.

Natasha uncapped the ballpoint. Time to start utilizing her sources.

i can already feel some of your questions forming—

so, percy's blindness. i've gotten a few comments about how somebody would have noticed, would have said something, especially since percy was literally surrounded by elite spies. this won't be explained in the story itself for a bit, but percy and hazel worked together to make a sort of Mist blanket around him. so people just kind of... notice the scars, but don't think 'oh, can he see?'

it also stops people from really making the connection with percy never looking people in the eyes, not reacting to visual stimuli, etc. for some, they think percy is in fact looking at them. for others, they just don't really think about it.

tony was actually beginning to notice something before percy told him. tony's not clear sighted, just smart <3

natasha: hmmm... this new WSC division is interesting...but nobody knows anything about it... i'll ask jackson! he might have heard a little something
percy, the founder and leader of the division: ...

PS i adore hearing your guys's headcannons and ideas in the comments!!!! <3 <3 if you have any, i'd love to hear em!

A Farewell Gift

Chapter Summary

Something just felt off about leaving like this. About waking up before the sun had even risen, to take every piece of life as he had come to know it, to shove it away and get out of the palace like a criminal in the night. Not even telling anyone he was leaving, disappearing before any of them were even awake?

Those were the actions of a guilty man.

And Bucky Barnes was guilty of a lot of things. But this? This was one thing he refused to feel at fault for.

Chapter Notes

i got like. two requests for more SWORD people so

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tuesday, July 8, 2017

11:52 AM

SWORD Headquarters, NY

“Commander!”

Percy’s head snapped up. “What?”

Bridgette sped into the conference room, her heartbeat fluttery and fast. “We have a situation.” She dropped a pile of loose papers in front of him. Percy raised a single brow and pulled them towards him, skimming his fingertips over the bumps.

When he first assembled the team, he decided on almost complete transparency. He had hid his disability from SHIELD for so long, it had been weird to have somebody in his work life actually

acknowledge it. When Percy found out Tony had bought a braille printer just for their floor, he was stunned silent. A hard feat for him. His team had been a little surprised when he first told them, naturally.

“Like, you can’t read? At all?” Dan had asked, leaning forward. Bridgette slapped him upside the head. “Don’t be *rude*. ” She hissed.

Percy just shrugged. “Light, big colors, and large movements. Even that’s a bit iffy, though.”

It was silent for a long moment, and Percy resisted the urge to fidget. Ross broke it. “Man, I just thought you fuckin’ *hated* reading.” He couldn’t help it—Percy let out a sharp bark of laughter. “You want to know the kicker?” He grinned. “I was severely dyslexic, when I could see.”

And that was the end of it. Percy had been expecting skepticism, questions about how he was able to do what he did. They were putting their lives in his hands—he figured they would demand some sort of explanation to his abilities. Nothing of the sort even happened. The only ‘incident’, if it could even be called that, happened a few days after he told them.

Mal had lost her pen. Apparently, this was something that was very, *very* upsetting. Mal had roped Dan and Bridgette into helping look for it, then they called in Ross and Lee to help lift couches.

“What color is it?” Ross grunted, looping his fingers over the edge of the loveseat.

Mal sniffed. “Purple.”

Percy walked into the room, laptop in hand, earbuds dangling around his neck. “What the hell are you guys doing? I can hear you moving furniture across the building.”

Bridgette spoke up from under the coffee table. “Mal. Pen.” She muttered, feeling around in the carpet.

The commander blinked a couple times. “Is this a joke?”

Lee groaned from the other end of the couch lifting duty. “No, sir. It’s a very good pen.” Percy had taken a few deep breaths, closing his eyes. He pinched his brow.

After a few glorious moments of silence, he sighed. “Describe the pen.”

Mal rocked on her heels. “Purple. Very good ink. Uh, mostly full, I think. One of the nice ones that click, not one with a cap.”

A flat look on his face, Percy tilted his head to the side.

“Filing cabinet. Second drawer from the bottom. You guys need to be more quiet.”

Then, he turned on his heel and strode out of the room. Even without his keen hearing, he would’ve caught Mal’s victorious shout as she held up her lost treasure. And then Daniel’s soft *what the fuck?* Immediately following it, Lee gasped. “He’s like a bat. Man. Man bat. Batman. We work for Batman. Dibs on being Nightwing.”

Percy didn’t think he had heard an argument start up that fast since his Camp days.

Back to the situation at hand, though. Bridgette dropped down into the office chair across from him. “I’ve been pulling them since we got the building. I know it’s a lot, but I can’t ignore that pattern.”

Percy wordlessly shuffled to the next page. It was silent for a long few minutes as he read through them, the only noise coming from the distant ticking of the clock.

She was right. As usual.

Expense reports. Not for SWORD, but for the Council. Like any government organization, the reports were comprehensive and mind-numbingly boring. Now, Percy was no math prodigy, but now that he was paying attention, it was glaringly obvious.

Half a million withdrawn from an account that didn’t exist. It was just like the money *disappeared*. “The hell?” Percy muttered. He flipped to the bottom of the stack. “Have you told anybody else about this?”

Bridgette shook her head.

Percy paused in his reading, then tilted his face up so she could see his expression. “Good. Don’t.”

She looked up at him, eyes wide. Percy didn’t budge. “Just for now. ‘Till we know more.” Percy shuffled a pile together, then moved onto the next folder. Bridgette gave an uneasy nod, and stood. She ran a hand over her skirt. The click of her heels echoed against the walls as she made her way to the doorway.

“And Bridgette?”

She turned.

“Stay away from this. We don’t know how dangerous this could be.”

Her mouth twisted unhappily. “Commander, I—”

Percy shook his head. “Archangel. Promise me.”

She grit her teeth. “Fine.”

“Thank you.”

Wednesday, July 9, 2017

6:02 AM

Wakandan Royal Palace, Wakanda

It didn’t take long for him to pack his bags.

Bucky didn't really own much. The most important thing he had was attached to his shoulder. But for everything else, Ayo had procured an inconspicuous black duffel. Bucky had protested; it was far too big, anyways. But she and Okoye each gave him a look and shoved it into his hands. Now, Bucky was no Stark, but he had enough smarts to not argue with the pair.

Which, now, seemed not only beneficial for his physical health, but because they were right, as well.

It hadn't taken long to shove the meager contents of his room into the duffel. Halfway through, Romanoff had silently appeared at his door. She walked in without a word and started helping him fold clothes and match socks. His heart jumped to his throat.

Not because of her sudden appearance—nobody had been able to sneak up on him since the sixties. But because nobody was supposed to know he was leaving. Maybe it was wrong, but he didn't want them to find out until it was too late to stop him.

Stevie was going to try, for sure. *Especially* if he knew where exactly his old pal was going. For the exact reason Shuri kept BARF's origins secret, she had kept a firm stranglehold on the information. Steve wanted to keep Bucky near him, and at first, Bucky couldn't blame him. He wanted to stick by his friend's side, too. Steve was the one constant he had, the one memory that he could hold on to.

But now, he could remember his apartment in Brooklyn, the stray cat he fed from the windowsill. His mother's voice, his father's strong arms, his little sister's face. And, yes, with every memory came a crushing, twisting sort of pain. But, after, a little piece of Bucky Barnes came back. One who's best friend was no longer his sole crutch in this new world.

And truthfully, Bucky wasn't sure if Steve could handle that.

Yes, Steve wanted his friend back. But he seemed to have forgotten that Bucky was his own person, not just an extension of the mighty Captain America.

Whether he knew or not, Bucky wasn't backing down. For the first time in eighty years, Bucky was deciding what was best for himself. And no way in hell was anybody getting in the way of that.

Romanoff seemed to catch onto his thoughts. "I'm just here to help you pack." Her voice was uncharacteristically soft. Bucky gave her a long, considering look. She hovered a few feet away from him, a neatly folded pair of pants in her arms. She gave him a rueful smile. "Promise."

He nodded once. And maybe he imagined it, but she seemed to relax a little at his acceptance.

Well, he guessed he wasn't the only one who had changed during their time in Wakanda.

Romanoff seemed a little less harsh, a little softer around the edges. And that was in a complimentary way, too. She seemed like she finally had a second to relax, despite everything going on. Though, for her, this whole 'exile and hiding away' thing was comparably tame to her usual life. Though her smiles were hidden and only shared with Barton, they seemed true.

The two ex-assassins had developed a sort of silent solidarity. It seemed, a few weeks in, Romanoff had quickly tired of her compatriots' antics. Maximoff and Steve, specifically.

Maximoff.

At first, Bucky had avoided her like the plague. He didn't know why; she just set the hairs on the back of his neck on edge.

Now he avoided her like the plague and he knew *exactly* why.

She held an incredible, unstable power at her fingertips. She could delve into people's minds and rip them apart, string them along to do whatever she wanted. Being so close to her made him feel sick. She had taken people's free wills from them, no doubt about it. Bucky knew her type. He could tell by the look in her eyes alone. He had spent enough time with men and women like her in his lifetime. Distantly, he wondered if she had enjoyed it.

Romanoff and Barton had been the ones to tell him that she had been a Hydra volunteer for more than a decade. Had been a willing participant in what had been decades of pure torture for Bucky. And just like that, she decided to switch sides? She was content being Hydra's tool for half of her entire life, but decided she felt bad and Steve just *accepted her*? He might as well have just spat in Bucky's face.

With Romanoff's help, Bucky was packed in no time. Like he said, he didn't own much. The bag

was only about half full. He was zipping up the last compartment when a knock on the door sounded. Bucky winced a little, half expecting Steve to barge in, demanding an explanation.

The redhead gave him a calming look, then made her way to the door.

Ayo stood on the other side.

Romanoff gave the warrior a long look, then back at Bucky. Seemingly satisfied with what she found, she gave him a supportive half smile and excused herself, slipping out without a sound. Well, it was as good a goodbye as any.

Ayo took a few steps inside, the door softly clicking shut behind her. Bucky blinked a couple times, then did a double take. For the first time that he had ever seen, she was lacking her polished spear, the reds and browns of her armor. Instead, she was dressed casually, like Nakia or Shuri, the few times he had run into them in the library. Her hands were even casually shoved in her pockets, the picture of normalcy.

She rolled her eyes at his scrutiny. "It's my day off." She commented dryly.

Bucky let out a soft huff. "Right. Sorry. 's somethin' wrong?" The tinge of panic was involuntary.

"Calm yourself, Sergeant. I'm just here to see a friend off."

"What?"

Ayo didn't even look at him, slinging a small pack off her shoulder, muttering something about *obtuse Americans*.

"You, Barnes. I'm here to say my farewells." Ayo gave the pack a little shake. "And bestow a parting gift. From Shuri and the rest of the Dora." When he didn't move to take it, she grabbed his wrist and looped one of the straps around it. "There you go."

He looked down. It was fairly heavy, slightly larger than his head. It was a nice shade of tawny, strong but flexible.

“It’s polite to thank people for gifts.”

Bucky looked up, startled. “I—Ayo. I can’t take this.” He received another long-suffering eye roll. “You don’t even know what it is, Barnes.”

Robotically, he dropped the bag onto the bed. Fumbling fingers found the drawstring, gently coaxing it open. Once he saw what was inside, he tossed Ayo a wide-eyed look. She was biting her cheek to stifle laughter.

Almost reverently, he pulled out the small stack of books within. They were hardcovers, in perfect condition. The covers were elegantly done, the binding even. He traced one of the titles with a finger.

“We noticed you seemed to favor these few.” He could hear the smile in her voice. “And, well. We had enough to go around.”

Bucky swallowed. It was true. All the time he had spent in the library, there were a few books he had found that he read over and over again. Honestly, he didn’t think anyone really noticed.

“You good there, Sergeant?”

Bucky blinked blurriness out of his eyes. “You know, this is the first time somebody’s given me a gift since 1944?”

Ayo’s little *oh* was suddenly clouded with emotion similar to his own. Bucky cleared his throat, eyes not drifting from the precious stack of books. “It was my birthday. The Commandos had all pitched in. Gotten me a journal. Real nice, leatherbound. We went out drinking, after. I only remember half of it, but that’s probably ‘cause they were buyin’.” Bucky couldn’t help the fond smile that crept up on his face. “One of the first memories I got back.”

He looked at the books for a minute longer. Then, he turned to Ayo, with what might have been the most earnest expression on his face she had ever seen. “Thank you, Ayo. Really.”

She smiled at him.

He gingerly placed the books back into their bag, carefully tightening and tying the drawstring. Then unzipped the duffel, made a little nest out of the clothes. It was moments like this he was thankful for the sensitivity control of his new arm. Was he being overly cautious? Probably. But this was one of the most precious things he had ever held in his own two hands.

With a final look around the room, he hefted the duffel over his shoulder. He didn't realize quite how familiar the palace had become to him until Ayo walked him down the hallways, one final time. Away from his room, where he had first spent hours lying in bed, trying to convince himself that everything here was actually real. Past the hall that led to the labs, all the hours spent with Shuri. The grand stairs that went up to the library, all the time he hid away in stacks of poetry and catching up on world history. All the way to the ornate, carved doors that led up to the helipad.

For some reason, Bucky found himself hesitating, here.

His palm rested against the smooth wood, frozen. "Sergeant?" Ayo's voice sounded distant. Bucky frowned. What was his problem? This was his choice. His first choice in a while. So why did he feel like he was missing something?

"Uh, yeah. Just," he let out a breath. "Give me a second."

All he had to do was open the door. He had packed up everything he owned, plus the weight of a friend's gift a reassuring pressure on his back. Something just felt off about leaving like this. About waking up before the sun had even risen, to take every piece of life as he had come to know it, to shove it away and get out of the palace like a criminal in the night. Not even telling anyone he was leaving, disappearing before any of them were even awake?

Those were the actions of a guilty man.

And Bucky Barnes was guilty of a lot of things. But this? This was one thing he refused to feel at fault for.

"I—" Bucky turned to Ayo. "Can you hold this for a minute? I'll be right back."

She narrowed her eyes a little. "Is everything alright?"

Bucky set his jaw. “I just,” he shrugged. “I’m not sneakin’ out of here like—like I should feel guilty about going. This is my choice, and Steve’s just gonna have ta’ deal with it.” The words felt like weight off his chest. Ayo’s face stayed blank for a second, expression unreadable. Then, the slightest twitch of her lips, the barest hint of a nod. She wordlessly held out an arm for his bag. “Just this once. I’m not a valet.”

The slight smile on his face soon disappeared as he walked away from her. Back down the hallway, two lefts, a right. All the Rogues stayed in the same wing of the guest quarters, with a small common room to connect them. He knew, about now, that Steve and Sam would be up to chat a bit before they went on a run. And Barton would be up with Romanoff, the former attempting to stretch with the latter. Maximoff would usually sleep in well past ten, but she would be up this morning to catch a television program she liked.

He could hear them from the other side of the door. Exactly like he predicted; the clinks of silverware and dishes, footsteps on the floorboards, the soft unrolling of a yoga mat.

Bucky closed his eyes. He took in a few breaths, steeling himself.

He pushed open the door and stepped inside.

Chapter End Notes

percy at his SWORD teammates: you guys arent skeptical??? at all??? you have zero questions??

everyone, who once watched him incapacitate 17 armed men with his bare hands: none.

the real important ship here is mal x that pen

i just love ayo, okay?????

Broken Toys

Chapter Summary

Steve was the first to notice him.

Chapter Notes

you guys seemed pretty hyped about bucky popping off, so here it is a week early.
never say i havent been merciful.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wednesday, July 9, 2017

6:36 AM

Wakandan Royal Palace, Wakanda

Steve was the first to notice him. “Buck? What’s up?”

He sounded confused. It rankled Bucky a bit, but he knew he didn’t often spend time in the common room. Especially not at this time in the morning, when he knew everyone would be there.

Steve drifted out of the kitchen to the door, his brow furrowed. “Are you going somewhere?”

Bucky shoved his hands into the pockets of his jacket. It wasn’t a hard guess to make; he wasn’t dressed for a typical day of reading or training in the palace. Across the room, Romanoff slowly released from a complicated looking twist position. She made eye contact with Bucky over Steve’s shoulder. The slightest raise of her brow was the only indicator of her surprise. She, too, probably expected him to vanish away like the ghost he had spent decades being.

It seemed to be a pleasant surprise, though. *Bold*, she mouthed.

Bucky gave a tiny shrug he knew only she would notice.

Then, he turned back to Steve. “Yeah. I am.”

The blonde leaned his back against the island, hands on the marble countertop. “Shuri taking you out into the city again?” He hummed.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

“No. I’m leaving.”

This got everyone’s attention. Wilson turned off the tap, quietly putting the sponge down. Barton pulled himself into a sitting position. Maximoff muted the television and swiveled from her spot on the couch.

None of their reactions were much compared to Steve’s, though.

It was like watching somebody speedrun the stages of grief. First, confusion, his head tilted to the side. Then he held a breath, like he was waiting for Bucky to laugh and tell him he was joking, that Shuri was flying out with him to visit one of Wakanda’s more remote labs. When that didn’t happen, his brow furrowed heavily, his lips turning to a thin line. “What do you mean?”

Breathe in. Breathe out.

“BARF is a brilliant piece of tech, but Shuri can’t operate it on her own. She reached out.” He looked down at the floor, then back up at Steve. “I’m flying out to New York in fifteen minutes.”

Steve pushed himself off the counter. “Really, Buck? Why didn’t you tell us we were leaving before now? Christ, I’ll start packing—”

Bucky cut him off. “Not *we*, Steve. Me. If you recall, all of you are war criminals wanted by almost every government out there.” Bucky wasn’t going to lie; that was part of the appeal of leaving. Going somewhere where the others actually couldn’t follow. T’Challa had worked some magic, pulled some strings and called in some favors. When Stark began his campaign to amend the Accords (and *boy* hadn’t that been a surprise), the king had contacted the man to put out feelers about a deal for Bucky.

Stark had been startlingly amenable. In fact, he already had something in the works.

It was brought all the way to the Senate. Bucky's service record, the evidence from Zemo and the SHIELD dump, plus the proof of his progress, had made for a favorable situation for him. Especially once BARF was brought up.

Sure, he would have to go through all his BARF sessions, multiple checks that the trigger words were actually gone, and regular therapy, but...

Bucky would finally be a free man.

Steve crossed his arms. "Buck, you don't need to go alone. I'm sure we can figure this out." He gave Bucky a reassuring smile. "Don't worry about it."

"I'm not worried." Bucky lied. "It's already figured out. I'm going, *alone* . End of discussion. I just came to say goodbye."

Steve's frown got deeper by the second. "This is ridiculous. You see that, right? You don't even know where they're sending you! How do you know you can even trust who made that thing?"

Bucky crossed his arms, defensive posture matching Steve's. Christ, was Steve always this patronizing?

"See, I thought, based on the way you were acting, 'that thing' was God's gift to man." He remarked bitterly. "Or was that only when you thought it would be getting you your best friend back?"

Barton's brow shot to his hairline. Wilson's eyes widened. Maximoff stood up.

"What is the matter with you?" Steve threw his hands up. "I just want what's best for you!"

"*No*, Steve. You want what's best for you! I made my choice, and you need to stop trying to talk

me out of it!”

Steve stared, taken aback. Maximoff took the opportunity to jump in. “Wait, why does he get to go back home while we’re all stuck here?”

Bucky didn’t bother trying to disguise the snarl that escaped his throat. Honestly, why on Earth did he think he would get some support on this? “Probably ‘cause I spent eighty years being tortured and controlled, and you spent the last decade being the one doing the controlling and torturing.” He spat.

“Bucky!” Steve exclaimed, giving Wanda an apologetic look. “He didn’t mean that.” He reassured her quietly.

He scoffed. “Yeah, the hell I did! For fuck’s sake, Stevie, you can’t keep *doin’* this. She’s not a child. You said that yourself when you brought her to Lagos.” Maximoff sniffed, arms pulled in around her. Romanoff leaned against the far wall, not bothering to hide the slight smirk. “Don’t try to tell people what I do and don’t mean, I can communicate myself *perfectly* clear.”

“Buck-” Steve tried. Bucky didn’t lose his momentum. “And you know what? I know *exactly* where that tech came from and where I’m going! I’m a fucking grown man, punk, I can make my own damn choices.”

Suddenly, Maximoff’s eyes widened, gasping like she had come to a great epiphany. She pointed an accusing finger at him. “It was Stark Industries, *wasn’t it?* That’s where it came from!”

He didn’t even try to disguise the slight glee. “Minus the *Industries* part, yeah!”

She gasped like he had shot her. “You’ve been talking to *him?* ” She spat his name like it was a filthy word. “How could you? After what he did to all of us?”

Steve stared at him. “You’ve been talking to Tony?” His voice was a contradicting quiet to the tense anger in his shoulders and hands.

“My god,” Bucky groaned. “No! Not that it matters ! Stark sent the tech without even being asked, because that’s the kind of person he is, Steve! Out of the good of his heart, that man made something that could *fix me*.”

It seemed Maximoff didn't like the way the argument was going. "It's his fault I lost my family!" She yelled. Bucky could feel his eye twitching. He was trying to keep his cool, reminding himself to take deep breaths like Ayo always told him to.

"I had to watch, to lay there for hours next to *his* bomb!" Maximoff went on. "He killed my family!"

"*And I killed his!*" Bucky roared.

The room went silent. Wilson and Barton both shared twin uneasy looks. Bucky didn't even spare them a glance.

"With my *bare hands!*" He seethed. "I had to watch the life of one of my *best friends* fade out of his eyes, Maximoff!"

He breathed in through his nose, squeezing his eyes shut.

"And is that *really* the logic you want to go by?" He said, tone turning icy. "You, of all people?" Bucky took a step forward.

Her lip curled. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"So you can take revenge on him for his associate selling under the table weapons?" Bucky pressed.

Her eyes were definitely glowing, now, a pulsing scarlet that he refused to let scare him. "He should have stopped it." She hissed.

Bucky closed the rest of the distance between them. Even Steve took a step back. "So does that mean I get my fair shot at *you* ? You did volunteer at Hydra, didn't you? You should have known what they were doing to me. You can read minds, after all." Maximoff swallowed.

He smiled. “What do you think, witch? Can you trap me in my worst fears before I snap your windpipe?”

Magic swirled across her palms. “Want to find out?” But she couldn’t disguise the note of fear in her voice. They were almost nose to nose, now. Ignoring Steve’s scandalized cries of *Wanda!*, he leaned close to her ear. “I’ve been living my nightmares for a century. There’s nothing you can show me I haven’t already seen. If you think you scare me, you’re wrong.”

He watched her throat bob. Bucky didn’t move an inch. It was her who took a few, uneasy steps back. “Traitor.” She hissed.

“Oh, to what cause, Wanda?” Romanoff scoffed. “He’s going to get help. You need to get over yourself.” Maximoff shot her a betrayed look. The spy didn’t even twitch.

“You’re really choosing *Tony* ? Over us?”

Bucky ran a hand through his hair. “Fuckin’ hell, Stevie. I’m not choosing him, I’m not choosing you. For once in my goddamn life, I’m choosing *me* . If you can’t support that, then me leaving is better than I thought.”

“I—”

“Can it, punk. I don’t want to hear it. Stark is doing so much to help me, and you say his name like he’s a piece of shit under your boot.” Bucky shook his head. “You’d think my wellbeing was more important than your feud with him.”

Steve shook his head. “You don’t know him like I do, Bucky.” His tone was bitter. And angry. Angrier than Bucky had ever seen him. “He’s *vain* . Arrogant. He’ll lose interest in you like the rest of his broken toys.”

The flash of hurt on Bucky’s face was immediate and impossible to disguise. He could tell Steve regretted the words as soon as he said them, mouth falling open a bit.

Behind the counter, Wilson’s face turned furious. “What the *hell* , Rogers?”

Off to the side, he could see Romanoff stiffen, slowly bringing her shoulders up, her eyes narrowing. It was a dangerous look, one that would normally set him on edge, even though Bucky knew it wasn't directed at him. But he couldn't bring himself to focus on that, not when his vision was tinged with red, when he could hear the blood roaring in his ears.

Bucky's breathing was labored, he was so pissed. "That's just like you, isn't it? The easy way out. You can't *bear* to see you're wrong. You just saw what you wanted to see because it made *you* feel better for acting the way you did." He looked around the room. "It's easy for all of you when he's just some reckless, self absorbed, cocky billionaire, isn't it?"

Barton and Wilson avoided his gaze. Romanoff met it with an accepting look.

"It's so much easier for you to feel like he deserved it. To *lie* . You already know what you did was wrong, but you just aren't a good enough man to admit it." Bucky shook his head, shoving his clenched fists back in his pockets.

"Screw this. I'm leaving, Steve. I hope by the next time I see you again, you've got your head out of your ass."

Bucky turned on his heel and stormed out of the common room, loudly pulling the door shut behind him.

Behind him, his keen ears only picked up a long moment of silence from the assembled Rogues. Then, in a tone soft but strong, Wilson spoke. "You, Steven Rogers, are a dick." It was followed by the clatter of dishes as they were put away.

Bucky's hands were trembling with rage, and he was clenching his jaw so hard he was almost scared he would crack a tooth. The entire way back to Ayo, he was fuming. She gave him a long look and handed him his bag, but let him stew in his silence.

The helipad was pleasantly cool, holding that early morning breeze, combated by the rising sun over the skyline. Bucky closed his eyes for a second, letting the light warm his face. He barely registered Ayo coming to stand next to him.

"Say everything you need to say?"

“Yeah.” Bucky sighed. “Yeah, I did.”

The jet was getting a last minute tuneup, technicians scurrying in and out of it. At the far end, Shuri oversaw, a tablet attached to her arm. When she saw him, she gave an exaggerated wave. “Over here, Sergeant!” She met him halfway, and as soon as he was in hearing range, she began, not looking up from the tablet.

“Okoye will be flying, with Nareema as her co-pilot. I can’t come with this time, but fear not! I’ll be there to assist for your first BARF session. You have all your stuff packed? Good. The flight will be a couple hours, so get comfy. If anything goes wrong, you can email me, Okoye, or my brother at any time, and you’ll be back in Wakanda before you know it.”

“Good to see you too, princess.”

Shuri rolled her eyes. “Hello, Sergeant.” She muttered, eyes still glued to the screen.

Huh. Sometimes, it was jarring to remember that, despite all her brilliance, Shuri was still a teenager. Bucky remembered being her age; bringing schoolwork home to a bedridden Steve, sneaking sips of cheap liquor with his friends behind the community center, spending the cold, wet days in the heated library when they were behind on bills.

The princess walked briskly past him, giving one of the technicians a few rapt orders. She stepped into the ship, giving a quick look around.

Yeah, being a teenager seemed like a very different thing now-a-days.

He didn’t mind the stark difference, though. Part of it was that he liked the way the world was now. Things had changed a lot since his adolescence, for the better.

(When Bucky found out what anti-vaxxers were, though, he lost his *damn mind*)

The other part one that he *remembered* enough of his childhood to notice the contrasts. Sure, a lot of it, probably most of it, if he was being honest, was still missing. So were most of his days as the Soldier, especially when he wasn’t deployed on a mission.

But it was progress. Sometimes Shuri asked him things, seemingly out of nowhere, about what it was like for him growing up. And, yes, most of his answers seemed to horrify her a little. He would never forget the face she made when he told her that they went through most of the winters without heating and the summers without AC.

Though she seemed thoroughly shaken, he always had a little smile on his face when he successfully recounted something important to him.

He found himself drifting to the edge of the helipad, looking over the slowly awakening city. Bucky had seen a lot of things in his time. Like, a *lot*. He knew, instinctually, that he had been all over the world. Hydra pulled him uncaring of borders. That he remembered, though, Bucky doubted he would ever see something equal to this.

Wakanda was beautiful. Sleek architecture, clear skies, natural greenery. Bucky's favorite thing, aside from the royal library, would always be the sunrises.

He had a perfect view of it here. Peeking over from the east, just over the tip of one of the city's hospitals, a warm orange glow cast itself across the sky. Soft pinks, yellows, and the fading night's sky from black to blue. Everything was bathed in soft light as the city woke up, as stalls opened their shutters and stores flipped over the '*open*' signs in the windows.

Everything seemed so achingly familiar, here. A part of him wanted to walk right off the helipad, down the stairs and halls, into the common room. He could apologize to Stevie, then settle in to do yoga with Romanoff and Barton, then eat breakfast that Wilson always made.

Bucky knew he was kidding himself. That would certainly be the easy thing to do. To pull himself back into the only thing he knew. But it wasn't what he needed in life. Not needed, nor wanted.

He stayed there, staring over the city, until it was time to leave.

Chapter End Notes

bucky being a material guy

so i want to make, like, a playlist for the series. do you guys have any suggestions, either in general or to go with specific moments?

Expense Reports

Chapter Summary

Tony Stark was waiting on the roof for him.

Alone.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wednesday, July 9, 2017

1:04 PM

Above Manhattan, NY

Seeing New York was surreal. Since he had gotten free of Hydra, Bucky hadn't spent much time in the US. The little time he did spend was in DC, anyways.

Though the buildings were taller and the cars sleeker, the city still held some of the same feeling to it. The sky was filled with smog and the streets were still packed tight like a can of sardines. People walked shoulder to shoulder, flipping off cars and screaming at passerbys who bumped into them. It was filthy, trash littering the streets and dumpsters overflowing.

It felt like home.

As high up as he was, Bucky could hear and see it all. Granted, it was muted, and the words indistinct, but the sound of an angry New Yorker was deeply pressed into his subconscious.

He closed his eyes.

Leaving the others still weighed on his shoulders. It was for the best, he knew that. But Bucky still hated leaving things on bad terms, especially with Steve. Even though he was absolutely *pissed* at him.

He'd miss Ayo and Shuri for sure, though. And his goats. He'd really miss the goats.

"Coming up to the landing pad, Sergeant."

Bucky slowly breathed out of his nose. "Alright. Thank you."

Tony Stark was waiting on the roof for him. Alone.

The man cut a sharp figure in his suit, tailored down to the millimeter and definitely worth more than Bucky's old apartment. His face was steady and hard, unflinching even as the wind ruffled his dark hair.

The jet landed soundlessly on the helipad. Okoye turned in the pilot's seat to face him. Her gaze was narrowed, but she said nothing. Just nodded once.

Bucky fumbled for his seatbelt, unclipping it with a numb hand. He rose on unsteady feet, reflexively shoving his hands in his coat pockets, drawing his shoulders in. With only a slight tremor, he grabbed his bag and hoisted it over his shoulder.

Every step to the exit was like the booming of a drum.

"One call." Nareema said softly. "Just one."

He turned to face her over his shoulder, one hand still on the doorframe. Suddenly, Bucky's tongue felt leaden in his mouth. There was nothing he could do but nod, hoping it conveyed his gratitude.

The air was cold, the wind biting at his exposed face. Bucky kept his chin lowered to prevent his eyes from watering. He didn't look up, not until Stark's shoes came into sight.

"Barnes."

The man's voice was cool, devoid of emotion. Bucky swallowed. "Dr. Stark." He murmured.

Stark was silent for a moment—Bucky didn't have to look up to receive the man's critical gaze. The billionaire opened his mouth to say something, but just shook his head. He turned on his heel. "Follow me."

Bucky trailed after him without a word. Not as they went across the roof, as he gave the Wakandan ship one last look, nor when they descended the stairs down to the 93rd floor. The tower itself was almost as tall as Empire State, he was pretty sure. He remembered when it was first built; he and Steve would sometimes walk far enough to be able to catch a glimpse of it.

Back then, it had been the tallest building in the world. Shuri had told him that the title now belonged to a skyscraper in Dubai. Well, more accurately, she had said *It's the tallest that they know of*, with an impish smile. Bucky hadn't seen the title-bearing skyscraper himself, but he was almost certain that they were beat effortlessly by Wakanda's.

Stark gave him the grand tour of the top three floors, starting at the 91st, with a bland voice and a blank face. And Bucky would be lying if he said he wasn't impressed, despite it all. Especially when voices started coming out of the ceiling.

"Boss. Sergeant Barnes."

Stark didn't even blink, but Bucky jumped about a foot in the air, looking around wildly.

"This is FRIDAY. She runs the tower. If you need anything, ask her."

And that was that.

Stark led him down into the elevator, to the 93rd floor, and down the first hallway to the right. He then pointed at the door right in front of them, said "Yours." and left.

He had his own apartment in the building, with a bedroom, kitchenette, living room and bathroom. The wall facing the outside of the tower was made entirely of windows, which made him antsy. When he had, extremely hesitantly, asked a question to the ceiling, FRIDAY informed him in a clipped voice that all the glass in the building, especially the windows, were stronger than any commercially available plexiglass.

There was a desk, a queen sized bed, a walk in closet, shelves, even a kettle on the stove.

Bucky couldn't do much except sit on the edge of his new bed, duffel pulled next to him, in a daze.

He didn't dare to unpack. Unpacking meant he would be there for a while.

Wednesday, July 9, 2017

2:44 PM

Stark Tower, NY

Tony wasn't sure how long he had been there. Long enough to worry Percy, probably. As soon as he had dropped Barnes off in front of his room, Tony had hightailed it out of there, down to the safety of his lab.

The demigod entered his field of vision without a sound. He didn't say anything; just sat down next to Tony on the couch. He seemed just about as tired as Tony—which made sense. Running a newly formed specialized government strike team was hard work. Or so Tony had heard.

He sighed, squishing himself down further into the cushions. Slowly, he let his head flop to the side to face his friend. Percy's hair was a mess, like he had been running his hands through it over and over again. The stripe of dyed black hair was fading again, Tony noticed, revealing that dull gray hue.

"Hey, Percy?"

He received a hum in response.

A tad hesitantly, "Why did you retire Deathstroke?"

Percy's steady, even breaths stuttered. He slowly sat up, moving away from the back of the couch. "Why do you ask?" He said in a false-light tone.

Tony just shrugged.

With a soft snort, Percy echoed the gesture. "It..." He sighed. "I never wanted to be a merc, you know. Didn't really want to join SHIELD either, but," Percy rested his chin on his palm. "Life never goes right. Especially for me. After I quit, I was plannin' on going back to the HSRD. It was tough, but I liked being able to help people like that. Then," he said heavily, "the file dump happened."

Slowly, Tony straightened.

"A friend owed me a favor, and I got my file erased. But it was still too risky. Especially for my family. I went underground. Then..." His brow pinched. "Then Estelle got sick."

Tony stared at him in a horrible mixture of shock and pity. Christ, Jackson really couldn't catch a break, huh?

As if he could read his mind, Percy gave a humorless smile. "We needed cash. Bad. I had the skills, the opportunity. I started taking hits. Bounties, revenge kills, you name it. Johnson was the one who got me in contact for my first bounty. Without her, I wouldn't have been able to do it, y'know? Being Deathstroke...I just felt like it should die with her. Least I could do." Percy's shoulders curled inwards. "Soon as I got out of the medbay, I took all my gear and my mask and put it in storage."

Closing his eyes and leaning back against the couch, Tony nodded. "I get that." He murmured.

He waited for Percy to say something more, but he never did.

Wednesday, July 9, 2017

1:04 PM

The Hub, NY

Bridgette wasn't a good liar. She never really had been, ever since she was a kid. It wasn't pulling off the actual lie that was the problem; it was the *guilt*. There was a reason she stuck to SHIELD's legal team and not their field operations.

And right now, sitting in the dead silent SWORD conference room, she was practically pinching herself not to blurt.

Dan was directly to her left, his computer pulled close to him. And Christ, that man typed fast. She knew if she asked, he would go off on a long tangent about the software he was using to search old files the WSC has given them from SHIELD.

The decision had been surprising to them all, except Commander Jackson. But then again, she wasn't quite sure anything could really surprise that man. He was young, only a few years older than her, but he just held that aura of someone who had seen it all.

Uh, *experienced* it all. Shit, was that insensitive?

Hanover herself had called in the team to hand over the files. That's how important this was. The Councilwoman and the Commander had exchanged a few words out of her hearing range, but Bridgette could take a good guess as to what it was about.

So now, all of them were sitting quietly at the round table, going through files and lists and debriefs from the last couple of years. Specifically, around the winter of 2014. Everything was a mess, really.

When the file dump had happened, the WSC had taken it down as soon as they could. But not soon enough. Lord knows how many people saw and downloaded what was on the web. Pretty much every government out there has delegated a team to track down all of the stolen information they could find; from wannabe hackers to black market deals.

All of it had been put in a database under lock and key; one that expanded every day. Piece by piece, all of SHIELD's server information. It was a miracle they had even gotten access to it. It was one of the most highly guarded things in the country, maybe even the world.

Most of the stuff on there was shocking. Experiments and alien technology and close encounters of a whole other kind. The WSC had been having an absolute conniption about everything Fury and

Hill had hidden from them.

And that's exactly why her teammates were a little put off by the fact that they were looking into old accounting records instead of the alien hard drive dropped in the Caspian. Nobody complained, of course, but Bridgette could see their faces; ranging from confused to disgruntled.

There was just so *much* of it. With a pinched look, Jackson had told the team that they had orders from up high. Like, *all the way* up high. To look through every single one of those reports, every excel sheet and bit of footage. Every sketchy, sci-fi sounding thing SHIELD had, they were given access to—even though they just needed financials from a single year.

Ever since the last election, since Ellis's term had ended, things had gotten worse.

President Landry was a tall, imposing man. Bridgette had seen him countless times on the news, his shoulders always set and his spine always straight. She knew he was part of the reason they had gotten as far as they did with SWORD, much to her frustration.

It'd be good have have humans policing the humans again.

Now, Bridgette personally hadn't been there to hear him say that, but Councilwoman Hanover was, and she parroted it to the Commander with a sour look.

It was no surprise Landry was, in her informed opinion, an asshole. He wasn't shy about his take on the country's Enhanced population; it was one of the main parts of his campaign. People were scared; it was almost impossible to look at a newspaper without some sort of headline proclaiming *Mutant Takeover* or *Jobs lost to the Enhanced!*

Something people just didn't seem to understand was that not every Enhanced out there was the Hulk, or Thor, or even the Winter Soldier.

Almost an hour ago, Aspen had come back from their lunch break with a twelve pack of energy drinks, thumping it on the table with an unhappy expression. The pack had slowly dwindled over time, because *seriously*, accounting? The only ones who hadn't touched it were Lee and Mal, who Bridgette suspected weren't fully human. Seriously, they both had mugs of *tea* in front of them. Not even multiple.

Though, she digressed as she closed her file and added it to the pile, they were very cute mugs.

It was like swallowing a particularly large pill, not being able to tell the team exactly why they were looking into it. Sure, Bridgette knew Jackson wouldn't have her keep it a secret without reason. It was still eating at her, though. Not even Aspen knew, and they had been with her when she had come across the file she presented to Jackson.

Though, maybe it really was better this way. Bridgette was no fool; she knew there was more to the story. The way the commander's face had changed as he read over the incriminating reports was evidence enough. There was clearly stuff she didn't know.

Jackson's grave tone when he told her to stay away from it still made her uneasy. At least with the reports, they could be somewhat involved. Even if none of them really knew what they were involved in.

Not even Jackson fully knew, she suspected.

Bridgette sighed, flicking through another collection of expense reports. Whatever it was, it had to be *big*.

Wednesday, July 9, 2017

3:04 PM

Midtown School of Science and Technologies, NY

Peter was only slightly ashamed to admit he jumped when he got Mr. Stark's text.

Him and Ned had been in a very intense round of robotics trivia, alright? MJ had rolled her eyes and called them nerds, but Peter was fairly sure she was pleased they were actively practicing. Because, of course, AcDec was the only school activity that went on year round, *including* summer.

To his left, Cindy and Abe were laying on the cool cafeteria tile, her cardigan on the table next to his flannel. About half an hour in, they had both simultaneously moved to the floor in an attempt to

cool down. Neither had gotten much practice in, in favor of complaining about the heat.

To be fair, it was sweltering outside. The hottest this summer, so far — the last Peter had checked, it had broken the triple digits. And, truthfully, he couldn't be happier. The cold was his enemy, but he thrived in the heat. Especially on humid days like today. He didn't even bother removing his hoodie, which, according to Sally, gave her 'heatstroke by proxy'.

The cafeteria's AC was either faulty or completely broken. Peter could hear the unhealthy whining from the unit all the way from his table. Next practice, he swore he'd bring a wrench to school and see what was going on. Though he was a fan of the humidity, it was no hard task to see everyone else was suffering. Even MJ had rolled up the ankles of her jeans.

"Is that Mr. Stark?" Ned said in a poor attempt at a whisper. Luckily, everyone was either too focused or half asleep to notice.

Peter shrugged, digging his phone out from his bag. "Probably May. She might want me to pick something up from the—" He caught a glimpse of the notification. "—store." He finished lamely.

Ned leaned over. "What? What is it?" He asked excitedly. "Is it a mission? Ooh, I hope it's a mission. Oh! Or maybe something better! You get to be an Avenger? You get an Iron Man suit? You better let me take a joyride in it, Pete."

Peter stared numbly.

"That's not it, is it? Hm. Oh! Oh my God, Peter, is it Captain America? Holy shit, did he die? Did Captain America blow something up and die and Mr. Stark needs someone to take the shield and you're the only one who can do it? Peter," Ned gripped his shoulders. "Are you the new Captain America?"

"I—what? No!" Peter spluttered. "Why is that one of the first things you thought of?"

Ned shrugged. "Hopeful thinking."

"...Your hopeful thinking included the tragic death of Steve Rogers?"

He received another shrug. Eh, fair enough.

Peter shook his head, and without a word, handed Ned his phone. A second later, his friend paled.

Mr Stark: Barnes arrived an hour and a half ago.

“Shit,” Ned muttered.

“Yeah, *shit*. How do I even respond to that? What should I say? Just *Ok* ?” Peter flailed his hands.
“Do I apologize?”

“Why would *you* apologize?”

“I don’t know!”

“What the hell are you two losers talking about?” Peter, and he would deny this till the day he died, squeaked. MJ gave him one of the most unimpressed looks he had ever seen from her, which was a feat in itself. He sighed and handed her his phone.

MJ’s quick eyes scanned it. She let out a low hiss. “Already?”

Peter and Ned gave twin shrugs.

Gnawing on the inside of her cheek, she slid into the open seat across from them. “Did he say anything else?”

Slumping forward on the table, Peter morosely shook his head. “I’m going over for a lab day tomorrow. I’ll ask.”

Ned rested his chin on his palm. “Do...Do you think you’re gonna see him? Cause Peter, I love you, but I really don’t think you could take on the Winter Soldier on your own.”

Peter tipped his head in acknowledgement. “Yeah, me neither. But he’s not the Soldier anymore. Just Sergeant Barnes. And don’t get me wrong, he still scares the shit out of me, but I don’t think anyone is going to be fighting him.” He sighed. “At least, that’s the hope.”

MJ snorted. “Yeah, but when does anything go as planned?”

Peter didn’t quite have a reply for that. Ned leaned in further. In an even quieter voice, “What if he does turn back? What’s going to happen to Mr. Stark? The last time the two of them fought...”

All three of them soaked in a moment of uneasy silence. Mr. Stark hadn’t exactly talked a whole lot about what had happened in Siberia, but it wasn’t hard to work with what they had.

“Stark is the one running B.A.R.F. Just him, and a volatile Barnes.” MJ muttered. “Who knows what could happen during those sessions.”

Peter leaned back. It would be just the two of them, except for one variable. (And said variable’s ‘dog’)

“I think,” he said slowly, realization dawning. “That’s where Percy comes in.”

He received two pairs of raised brows. Shrugging a little, he continued, “I mean, you guys haven’t seen him in a fight. Not like I have. It’s...” He shook his head. “If there’s anyone who can take down the Winter Soldier, it’s Percy Jackson.”

“Really? I mean, we knew he was a damn good mercenary, and, you know, but...” Percy’s godly heritage went unspoken. Nor any mention of his abilities. Truthfully, Peter hadn’t told them much about it. With Percy’s permission, and apparently the blessing of an unspecified Olympian, he had told Ned and MJ the bare bones of it a few months before summer break began.

And by *bare bones*, basically everything he knew; which was astoundingly little. The one thing he didn’t touch on was what happened in Ontario.

Peter wasn’t sure when the next time he would close his eyes and *not* see that storm again. When he could go to sleep without thinking about how the earth itself seemed to shiver with the freezing temperature of the storm. How Percy’s body looked in a water-filled crater.

Peter didn't mention that. To anyone. The only other person who knew was Mr. Stark, and they had come to an unspoken agreement to not talk about it. They both knew he was a demigod, but after some light googling, Peter discovered almost a hundred possibilities for his parentage.

Halfway through the article of sea deities, both Roman and Greek, Peter had to close his computer. He could practically hear the screaming wind, the crashing of the lightning and the deafening thunder.

He hadn't looked into it since.

"He can do it." Peter said finally. "I have no doubt about that."

Chapter End Notes

bucky's here, guys. its happening

and yeah, the whole tony-bucky thing was kind of anticlimatic, i know, but its really the best i could do while staying in character for them. sorry

so i had a slight struggle with marvel's terminology, so this is how im gonna do it;

everything breaks down into three groups.

-humans. regular people from earth.

-aliens. anyone from beyond earth.

-enhanced. an umbrella term for anyone from earth, but with abilities. mutants, supersoldiers, mutated people like peter and bruce, even demigods count.

also, we're gonna slide into some slightly heavier topics soon, especially concerning a lot of the anti-enhanced bigotry going around. when necessary, ill leave TWs in the chapter notes up top.

ALSO!!!! ESTELLE IS FINE NOW! HAPPY AND HEALTHY, FEAR NOT

Pit-Walker

Chapter Summary

Tony did his best to not check over his shoulder every couple seconds. He knew, instinctively, Barnes was there. Sitting on the furthest chair possible from Tony, his shoulders drawn in and head lowered.

Chapter Notes

ucky percy time >:)

EDIT: HOLY FUCK GUYS I GOT NOMINATED FOR AN AWARD! It's the Irondad creator awards!!

There's more info on their tumblr - @irondad-creator-awards

i would give my kidney and left lung for votes and nominations <3

whoever nominated me, thank you so much!!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tuesday, July 8

4:02 AM

Stark Tower, NY

The first time Percy dreamed of Annabeth, he was twelve. It was only a few weeks before the school year started; they had long since gotten back from their first quest, and all three of them had gone their separate ways.

Percy lay on his tiny twin bed in his newly Gabe-free apartment, blissfully aware of the lack of cigarette stink. He'd fallen asleep with a faint smile on his face.

It didn't last.

First, it was Ms. Dodds. He didn't get Riptide in time. She tore him to ribbons.

Then, the Minatour threw his mom into a tree with a sickening crack. She didn't move afterwards.

That turned into Medusa catching Grover's ankle, pulling him down, and the next thing Percy knew, his best friend hit the ground with a dull *thunk*.

Annabeth was last. She'd had Luke's shoes. She was screaming as she was pulled down into the Pit, screaming until Percy and Grover could no longer hear her.

Percy had woken up with a strangled cry, shaking and soaked in ice cold sweat. His mom had run into the room so fast he almost missed it. She'd pulled him into her arms, a strong grip around his narrow shoulders. He'd been inconsolable for hours.

At some point, he'd learned to not scream anymore when he had nightmares. These days, he usually wakes up from them without the slightest sound. He knew Annabeth did the same, eventually.

She didn't really have nightmares anymore, though. He supposed living in paradise for almost a decade would do that.

(Sometimes, Percy couldn't help the jealousy that crawled up his throat. Every time, it tasted like bile.)

"Seven years," Annabeth murmured, sitting next to him.

He turned to her, brow drawn. "Yeah." His voice was soft. "Seven years."

She sighed, leaning back on her elbows, hair mingling with the wildflowers. "Sometimes, it doesn't seem real. But then I see you. You look so much older, now."

His mouth twitched upwards. Percy opened his mouth to speak, but she cut him off.

"Perseus Achilles, if you make a blind joke, I swear to God—"

He laughed. It seemed like the first time in a while since he had last done that. Holding his hands up in surrender, he mimed zipping his mouth shut.

Annabeth shifted, getting a better look at his face. “I just...I can’t believe you got to get to the end of your acne years.” She muttered. “Unfair.”

He scoffed. “Annabeth, you don’t get zits in Elysium. You don’t have to pay *taxes* .”

She gave him a look. “Percy, *you* don’t pay taxes. I know this, because we conspired to commit tax fraud *together*.”

He just shrugged. “Only one of us can go to jail for it, though.”

“Percy, I think if you ever got caught for everything you ever did, they wouldn’t bother with jail.”

“...fair.”

He laid down in the grass, letting the cool breeze rustle his hair. After a second, Annabeth moved to match him.

Their communication was fairly sporadic; though they shared a strong hunch as to why they would still talk like this, neither quite understood the *how*. It was never something they could control. Though, every year, without fail, they always found each other on the eighth of July.

Percy was actually the one who made the connection first.

Like most magical places, time was different in the Pit. What seemed like three months to him was only twenty-two days for the rest of the Seven.

For them, Annabeth Chase had died on the eighth of July.

The first time she appeared in his dreams, he almost didn't talk to her. After months upon months of nightmares that all started like this, could you blame him?

"Percy," She had whispered. When she reached out, gently cupping the side of his face, he flinched. He heard her heart speed up as she surveyed the damage to his face, his eyes. "Oh, *Percy*."

She threw herself into his arms. He caught her on instinct.

It was then he decided that he didn't care whether it was real or not. It was *Annabeth*.

But it was real. It was so *bafflingly* real. An oddity, Nico had said. Nothing he nor his father had ever seen before. Hades didn't try to interfere, to cut the connection, in the slightest. He owed the two of them that much, at least.

The first time, it had been sobbing and hugs and asking how everyone was, on each side.

The second, Annabeth wanted to talk seriously. "You're going to grow up, Percy. You're already older than I ever will be." She gently took his hand. "You need to promise me you'll move on. That you'll let yourself know more than just us, alright?"

He'd been blinking away tears, but he nodded. Annabeth had wrapped her arms around him, embrace as tight as ever. "Friends?" He'd offered. She nodded. "Friends."

It didn't take long for Percy to ask her for advice. It was Annabeth, after all

"I...I don't know what to do, now. I mean, I graduated. Honestly, I didn't think I'd make it this far."

Annabeth had turned to him, her brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

He sighed, resting his chin on his folded arms. "The Doors of Death are shut. Gaea's gone. But there are still so many monsters out there, ones that slipped through. They're going to come after me eventually. Hazel and Jason are safe in Camp, Nico never stays anywhere long enough to be

tracked, and Thalia isn't worth the risk; not with the Huntresses around. That just leaves the last Big Three kid; me."

His voice was barely a whisper. "I'm tired of living my life like a hunted animal, Beth."

Annabeth was silent for a long minute, her fingers tapping out an absent pattern on her knee. "Perce," she murmured, voice coated with gentle pity. "You know they're never going to stop coming for you." But then her eyes glinted, that ruthless steel gray. "Not unless you do something about it."

"What do you mean?"

"It's like you said. We've been living our lives as prey this whole time. But you have a chance, Percy. You're only going to get more powerful as you get older; you've already made it to nineteen. That's further than anyone has gotten in a very long time. Especially the Big Three kids."

In her voice, he recognized that tone. The same one she used when she laid down their plans of attack; whether at capture the flag or in battle. "Stop being hunted, and start hunting. You've made it this far. Make it count."

He'd leaned back, slowly taking in her words. As always, Annabeth had a point. To keep living the way he did, looking over his shoulder every second, was no way to live at all.

Percy never liked looking for trouble. He'd never really needed to; it found him. But maybe, now, he could start to meet it head on.

He'd kept her advice in mind, every time Mrs. O'Leary growled at what seemed to be a random passerby, when Percy focused on them a little too long and their Mist disguises fell apart. When, eventually, monsters stopped following him to work, lurking outside his apartment, waiting in ambush for him outside the grocery store.

Percy never went out searching for monsters. That's not who he was; if they left him alone, he left them alone.

They never left him alone.

And thus, monsters began to fear the name Perseus Jackson. The most fearsome of Poseidon's sons, he who tamed one of Hades's hounds, who held the sky and killed the Earth. Who'd trudged through the Pit, who had met Tartarus himself, and lived to tell the tale. Who'd clawed his way out, up to the surface world. Who'd fit in, down there.

Eventually, they began to call him the Pit Walker.

Annabeth was proud.

Thursday, July 10

11:53 AM

Stark Tower, NY

Tony did his best to not check over his shoulder every couple seconds. He knew, instinctively, Barnes was there. Sitting on the furthest chair possible from Tony, his shoulders drawn in and head lowered.

The posture of a defeated man, Tony couldn't help but notice.

He kept his gaze stubbornly forward on the screen, then to his watch. Back to the screen. T'Challa and Shuri said they would call at exactly noon, to discuss Barnes's therapy plan. Since the day Tony had taken him down to his room, this was actually the first time he had seen the Sergeant.

It was...awkward. Very, very awkward. Neither of them spoke, didn't even look at each other. Just them and the slowly ticking clock above the doorway of the conference room.

Tony knew it wasn't Barnes' fault. That none of it was, really. He wanted to tell the man that, *so* bad. To tell him that he *knew* because he did blame him at first, for all the death, all the pain. But then Tony watched the Doctor drag Percy away, out of the cell. He heard Percy scream. He wanted to tell Barnes that he understood, because Tony had spent every single night for the weeks afterwards getting woken up by FRIDAY, to go pull Percy out of nightmares when Mrs. O'Leary couldn't reach him.

He spent hours with an arm around the demigod as he shook, his face pale and sunken. *I didn't mean to*, Percy would whisper. *I was just so scared. I didn't know. I didn't mean to.*

Tony would tighten his hold, just a little. *I know*. He would reply.

But how did you even go about that? Just walk up to him and start their second ever conversation with *"Hi, remember how you murdered my parents? Well, it's okay. I can't tell you why or how, but I know you didn't mean to."*

Tony had a feeling that wouldn't work out so great.

Besides, the last thing he wanted to do was bring Percy into it. What had happened in Ontario was personal on so many levels, Tony didn't want to even talk about it aloud.

So he just sat there, looking at the screen, his watch, the clock.

Anywhere but Barnes.

When the footsteps echoed down the hall, Bucky almost wept with relief.

FRIDAY had called him down to the conference room exactly ten minutes before the call was scheduled to start. He'd walked in and sat as far as he could from Dr. Stark. Partially out of respect, and maybe just a little bit of fear for the seemingly omnipresent AI. Lord knows what she would do if Bucky was deemed a threat.

The silence was stifling.

When the glass door opened without a sound, Bucky slowly turned his head towards it.

Stark seemed relieved. He stood, making his way to the man in the doorway.

The man gave Stark a short, greeting smile and nod. They exchanged a few words, so hushed that Bucky couldn't quite understand. Then, Stark turned to Bucky and cleared his throat a little. "Barnes. This is Commander Jackson."

The commander was dark haired and bronze skinned, dressed in black pants and a gray shirt. Overtop, he wore a lightweight jacket with a logo on the breast pocket—Bucky recognized it as the WSC crest. A pair of darkly tinted glasses rested atop his nose. He was a few inches shorter than Bucky, but the way he held himself made him seem infinitely taller.

Jackson seemed to study him for a long minute. Then, he just dipped his chin in greeting and took a seat.

Stark looked between Bucky and the commander for a second, looking almost relieved. What had he expected to happen? A slow, sick feeling crept up Bucky's gut. Did... did Stark expect him to attack the commander?

Bucky swallowed thickly and returned his attention to the tabletop in front of him.

The screen lit up with the incoming call not even a minute later.

T'Challa and Shuri's faces appeared, in startling clarity. The king looked as composed as ever, and Shuri's face was wide with a grin. "Sargeant!" She greeted.

Bucky didn't try to resist the smile that crept up on his face. "Princess," he returned. Her attention moved to the other two occupants of the room. "Dr. Stark, and..." Shuri trailed off, face inquisitive.

"Jackson." His voice was a bit lower than Bucky expected, holding a distinctly scratchy quality. Only introducing himself with his name, Bucky noted. Not a man to flaunt titles, then.

Shuri blinked a few times, then nodded, taking it in stride. "A pleasure."

“Likewise.”

A man of few words, maybe?

T’Challa stayed a silent observer for the entire call, sitting back and listening while Shuri and Stark discussed the schedule for his BARF sessions. Similarly, so did Jackson. At Bucky’s best guess, the WSC had sent a representative to be present for the meetings. To observe and report, maybe?

“We’re not fully sure how BARF will affect the brain afterwards, especially concerning recovery times...” Shuri trailed off.

Stark nodded. “It will differ, most likely. Concerning what parts of the brain BARF targets in a session, and...” He shifted a little, though he didn’t look at Bucky. “And also the emotional state of the subject. Assuming everything goes right, every fourteen days should do it. We’ll wait longer if we need to on a week-to-week basis.”

Bucky’s ears perked up. Only fourteen days of recovery between sessions? That didn’t sound that bad, honestly. The side effects were a little concerning, but he trusted Shuri. And, to an extent, Stark as well. If the two of them said it was safe, he had no problems.

(A distant part of him couldn’t help but wonder; *How bad would it really be if something went wrong? If Bucky didn’t make it through the process?*)

“Our main concern, Sergeant,” Shuri spoke up again, directly addressing Bucky. He straightened his spine a little. “Is once the process is over. We have a fairly accurate estimate for how many sessions it will take for the conditioning to be fully reversed. However,” Shuri sighed, looking truly, deeply tired. “There is only one way to test that.”

Every cell in Bucky’s body froze. “...What?” He croaked.

Shuri looked down. “To...To fully test your condition after the final treatment, the trigger words will have to be said. One last test.”

Terror gripped him. Bucky knew the trigger words, they were burned into his brain and most likely would never come out. One of the only things keeping him going these days was the fact that he was the only one who knew them. The only one alive, that is.

“It is up to you to decide who you wish to be there during the process.” *Who to let know the words.*
“You have months to decide. Plenty of time.” Shuri said gently. But no, it wasn’t plenty of time.
Decades wouldn’t be plenty of time.

Ayo? They were friends; the first one Bucky had made since he’d come out of cryo, but they hadn’t really known each other for that long. Shuri? The princess was young; if it did work, if the trigger words had never left him, Lord knows what would happen. The words wouldn’t just undo everything he had worked for over the last two and a half years, but whoever had said them, whoever had activated the Soldier...

Whoever it was would have complete control over him.

Long ago, Bucky had vowed he would never put everything he had in someone’s hands.

He would rather die.

—

Barnes excused himself from the room so softly that Shuri barely heard him.

An understandable reaction, all things considered.

When she and Dr. Stark had come to that conclusion a week ago, she knew she should probably tell him straight away. She also knew it was incredibly selfish of her to not, to want his last few days in Wakanda to be good ones.

She was only a little comforted by the fact that he would have months, maybe up to a year, before he had to make his decision.

The amount of unknowns about BARF frustrated her. Dr. Stark had done a marvelous job, really, especially since he didn’t have the resources like Wakanda did. The only thing they really needed was more data. But it wasn’t like there were many people around like Sergeant Barnes.

Truthfully, Shuri had been initially worried about having the technology used on him. But then she got to talking to Dr. Stark; now, she had absolutely zero doubts that it was safe. Stark was the kind of man that would test it on himself before submitting another to it, no matter who they were.

And Shuri was fairly sure he *did* test it on himself at some point. What for, she had no clue. Not that it was any of her business, anyways.

After the Sergeant left, it was silent. Dr. Stark appeared deep in thought, his brow furrowed ever so slightly. Jackson, too, was silent, leaned back in his chair. Shuri took a moment to study the stranger; he hadn't introduced himself with any sort of title or rank, nor an organization he was affiliated with. She could see the WSC logo on his jacket, but *Jackson* could have either been his first or last name.

She knew very little about him so far, and it was a tad frustrating.

The heavy silence was broken by an accented Irish voice. "Boss, Ms. Potts is called. It is rather urgent."

Dr. Stark swore softly. "Thanks, Fri." He gave the two royals an apologetic glance. "I need to take this."

T'Challa gave an understanding nod as Shuri silently marveled at the AI's coding. The tone of her voice sounded so real, Shuri had almost started looking around for another person in the room.

Then, the strangest thing; as soon as Dr. Stark left the room, Jackson stopped leaning against the back of the chair. In the blink of an eye, his back was ramrod straight, his chin tipped upwards slightly towards the screen. His hands came up to rest on the tabletop. Shuri couldn't see his eyes behind his darkly tinted glasses, but she had the overwhelming feeling they were narrowed.

He seemed to savor his words even before he spoke, tapping a single fingertip against the wood.

"You left him in Siberia."

He spoke slowly, his voice drenched in a soft tone that sent goosebumps up her arms. It wasn't an accusation; it reminded Shuri more of a judge reading out a sentence, more than anything. In the few words he spoke, she got a hint of what sounded like a stereotypical New York accent;

normally, she would laugh, but she couldn't bring herself to do anything other than freeze.

Shuri had to admit; the guy was ballsy. Most people were intimidated by anyone from their nation; *especially* the royalty. Jackson didn't even look fazed in the slightest.

Her brother visibly cringed. "Yes."

Jackson leaned forward. "You were allies. And you *left him there*." His voice tapered off into a whisper, so quiet she could barely hear it. Nonetheless, it seemed to echo in the speakers. The tone of his voice sent shivers up her spine. " *Why ?*"

T'Challa lowered his head. "In truth? I believed he had other means of transportation. If I had known he would be stranded there, I never would have taken the actions that I did." T'Challa swallowed. "Abandoning Dr. Stark was not my intention in the slightest."

Shuri let out a soft *humph* despite the icy fear crawling in her veins . Serves her brother right, honestly. She had been furious when she'd found out what happened to Dr. Stark in Siberia, especially at her brother for leaving without a second thought.

Jackson slowly turned his head to the side. He had seemed so quiet, barely noticeable before. Now, he made the hair on the back of Shuri's neck stand up. "If it was," he said softly, "If I find out you are lying to me, in any way, I *will* find you."

Where did they *find* this guy? Shuri could hear her own heartbeat pounding in her ears. Despite it, though, she spoke up. "You do realize you are speaking to the King of Wakanda, correct?"

His smile was like that of a shark's. "Ask me if I'm afraid of your crowns, Princess."

Wisely, she didn't.

He held his silence for a moment longer, not moving a muscle. Shuri was fairly sure T'Challa, the Black Panther himself, was sweating a little.

Then, Jackson resumed his earlier position, hands coming up behind his head, the very picture of

relaxed. He gave the siblings a crooked grin.

Not even a second later, Dr. Stark quietly came back in. "Everything good?" He murmured to Jackson as he retook his seat.

Jackson didn't even blink, his smile not budging. "Peachy."

Chapter End Notes

bucky being all like 'did stark expect me to attack jackson?" like sweetie no tony was fully expecting percy to square tf up as soon as he was within ten feet of you. he wasn't worried what you'd do to percy, but what percy would do to you

percy just being a fake ass bitch-

annabeth just living her best life, full of peace and tranquility, except when she sees percy. then she thirsts for blood.

and yeah, percy and buck technically haven't really met but. stay tuned

Late Night in the Gym

Chapter Summary

He hadn't been called that in close to a century. But he hadn't been called James in even longer, since before he'd joined the army.

"Bucky is fine. I...I don't mind James either."

Chapter Notes

i said bucky percy and now? i deliver. rejoice, children

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Saturday, July 12

10:12 PM

Stark Tower, NY

Peter nervously tugged at the strap on his backpack the entire way up, his suit carefully folded up in the bottom. He'd ended patrol early today—it was a surprisingly calm night. Aunt May was working the night shift and had given him permission to spend the night at the tower. And since he wasn't going to be tired for a while, anyways, he might as well do something.

Logically, he knew that his chances of running into Sergeant Barnes were *well* below zero. Like, seriously, they were deep down in the negatives. But it didn't help the distant ping of his spidey sense, keeping him on a constant edge.

Before he went up to the labs, he made a quick stop at the 91st floor. It was all common areas; the communal living room and kitchen, training areas and gyms and the like. FRIDAY said Sergeant Barnes was in his own apartment up on the 93rd, so Peter figured he was in the clear.

Like all of the tower's residents, Percy had his own apartment on the upper floor. He just didn't mind spending time in the common areas, most days. So, Peter decided he'd drop in to see him and Mrs. O'Leary real quick.

The two of them were sitting at the coffee table. Mrs. O'Leary lifted her giant head off the couch cushion at the sound of the elevator dinging. The room was completely dark, barely any light even coming from the nearly full moon outside. Peter carefully navigated around the table, feeling around for the corner.

Percy pulled out one of his earbuds, a blandly amused smile on his face. "You know you can turn the lights on, Peter."

Peter shrugged, dropping down on the couch. Mrs. O'Leary's tail wagged as he scratched behind her ears. "I'll live. You can see the lights, though, right?"

He received a hum in return. "Kinda. Everything is so jacked up that, at this point, it's not even worth it. Dosen't help. Just gives me headaches, sometimes."

Peter nodded absently.

"How was AcDec?"

"Good! Ned and I got to be partners again. MJ thinks we have a pretty good chance at the championship this year."

Percy gave him a light nudge. "With you on the team? I have no doubt."

Peter was increasingly glad that Percy couldn't see the pink tinge to his cheeks. "The others are really smart, too." He protested. Percy just made a noncommittal noise in the back of his throat.

He sat there for a moment longer, peppering light kisses along Mrs. O'Leary's face. Then, Peter grabbed his backpack and moved to stand. As he walked out of the room, Percy called after him. "Did you take your binder off?"

Peter huffed, rolling his eyes a little. "Yes, *mom*."

If it wasn't too dark for Peter to see it, he was fairly sure Percy would've flipped him off. But still, a soft smile crept on his face as he got back into the elevator.

The sight of the labs, as always, calmed him down. Peter ran a hand through his hair, trying his best to smooth the loose curls down.

"Hey, Pete!" Mr. Stark called, quickly looking up at him.

Peter dropped his backpack on the floor. "Hi!" He chirped back. Mr. Stark's distinct choice of classic rock thrummed from FRIDAY's speakers. For Mr. Stark, he was sure it was fairly quiet, but ever since Peter, and Percy, to an extent, started spending time in the labs more often, he always played it quietly.

Peter felt bad, at first. It was Mr. Stark's lab, after all. He should be able to listen to whatever volume of music he wanted. It was Percy, though, who had smiled and thanked Tony.

"Enhanced Atlantean ears," He said with an apologetic smile. "I appreciate it."

Peter gratefully squeezed the man's wrist. The next time Mr. Stark left the room, Percy gently ruffled his hair. "Don't be scared to ask for things, kid. It won't get you anywhere good."

He sounded like he knew, on some personal level. Which he probably did. Peter had never asked about it too much—it seemed like a sensitive topic, really,—but he knew Percy had spent many years hiding his disability. There were probably many things Percy had needed over the years that he had never asked for.

The only thing Percy had really said about it was this; "If people knew about my sight, they'd ask questions. About how I could do what I did. And being an Enhanced... not a very safe thing to be. Especially back then, with Hydra lurking around. Given my luck, I'd probably end up in a lab in a month flat."

Peter carried those words with him, still. Being Spider-Man, Peter got it. One too many times he had checked the news to see his masked self on the headlines.

This mutant scum—

The Enhanced menace—

*Who knows what **it** wants, where **it** came from—*

Peter couldn't imagine what it would be like for that to be his whole life. For Spider-Man and Peter to be one in the same, to not have a mask to hide behind. Things had gotten better in a few short years, way, way better, but still far from perfect. And ever since the election... well, Peter was bracing himself for a severe backslide.

"What'chya workin' on?" Peter asked as he moved closer to the center of the lab.

Mr. Stark gestured to the blueprints projected on the table, thumb tapping absently on the corner of his mouth. "New thrusters for the suit." He cast a sideways glance at Peter. "You wanna help?"

"The fact that you even have to ask is a bit hurtful."

Mr. Stark laughed, wrapping an arm around Peter's shoulders and pulling him closer to the worktable. "Right, my bad."

Peter grinned up at him, leaning into the embrace.

Percy stayed in the common room for an hour or two after Peter left, finishing up the last couple pieces of paperwork to submit to Hanover. It wasn't like he was going to be able to sleep soon, anyways.

That was one of the highlights of telling off the Council about being corrupt; they didn't dare have anyone else receive SWORD's reports. The lowlight, however, was that as the guy in charge of the team, he had to do most of it. What he didn't have to do himself, he had to sign off on.

Thank the Gods for his magic laptop and Tony's obsessive AI programming. He's fairly sure FRIDAY has accessibility options that Percy doesn't even need, at this point.

It was the thought that counted, Percy supposed. After spending a long while observing Tony, Percy came to the conclusion that that was just how Tony showed affection. He gave gifts. Like, a lot.

What was, at first, the weirdest part to Percy, and was now the worst, was that Tony always seemed shocked when he thanked him.

It really did make Percy wonder just what life was like with the original Avengers team. It also, coincidentally, made him want to severely injure most of the original Avengers team.

For now, Thor and Dr. Banner weren't on his list. As far as he knew, neither had been spotted in more than two years. Tony had spent some time trying to contact both of them, but apparently Asgard and wherever-the-Hell-Banner-is don't get great cell service.

Out of the original six, it was just Tony now. Privately, Percy and Pepper agreed that it was for the better, despite all that it put Tony through.

Percy sighed as he sent the last report. Speaking of *putting Tony through something*.

He closed his laptop and left it on the coffee table, standing up. Percy rolled his shoulders, wincing as they cracked. Mrs. O'Leary pulled herself up, leaning into a stretch. Despite it all, he grinned, giving her a quick scratch.

"Fri, where is everyone?" He called, facing the ceiling.

"Boss and the Spider-Baby are in the labs, working on a project together. Nothing has blown up yet, if you were concerned."

"With those two? I always am."

"Evidence suggests that you are not one to talk, Mr. Jackson."

Percy sent a heatless glare at his best estimate of one of her cameras. “That’s low. It’s different for me.”

FRIDAY sounded distinctly amused. “If you say so. Ms. Potts is in a conference room on the 43rd floor for a shareholders meeting. She does not seem to be having a good time.”

Percy snorted softly. It was true; Pepper really hated those meetings. It was more the people that were present, rather than the topic of discussion. Plus the fact that part of it was over a call with their overseas investors, the meetings always ensured a late night. He had offered multiple times to do something that would get the building put on lockdown, therefore canceling any and all meetings for the day, but she had politely refused.

Her loss, Percy supposed.

“Colonel Rhodes left for D.C. two hours ago.” FRIDAY continued. “And Sergeant Barnes is in his apartment.”

Percy gave a short, thankful nod. His work for the day, and probably the next one as well, was done. But he still felt that itch under his skin, the one that quietly urged him to go out and do something.

Mrs. O’Leary trotted after him as he took the elevator to his apartment, then changed into a loose pair of sweats and then a shirt he was fairly sure he stole from Clarisse at some point. It fit, because *of course* it did. While Percy stopped growing around the time he joined SHIELD. The daughter of Ares, on the other hand, had kept growing like the freak of nature she was. By the time she was of drinking age, Clarisse had cleared 6’6.

Thank the Gods, though, she had finally slowed down.

Though, Percy considered as he gave his dog a quick pat as she settled in for the night, he wasn’t particularly surprised. Demigods always tended to be a bit taller than average; especially depending on your parentage. Ares and Mars kids always tended to be on the taller side of the taller side; as he made his way down to the gym, he recalled Sherman Yang was close to clearing 7’, last time he’d been to Camp.

Jason had a few inches on him, and Frank had almost a foot on the both of them. Piper was just an inch or two shorter than Percy, and Hazel and Leo only a few away from that. Percy was fairly sure

there wasn't a single demigod out there who was shorter than 5'8 by the time they graduated.

It was dark inside the gym, and Percy didn't bother asking FRIDAY to do something about that. It was like he told Peter earlier; he couldn't really see anything actually useful, anyways. The occasional blur of color was nice, but when he was trying to focus on something, he preferred to just do it in the dark.

The spare punching bags were kept in the back, hung up against the far wall. Percy went straight for the ones on the left; the hefty, stiff ones that were usually reserved for the super soldiers, and, now, the occasional spider mutant.

He wrapped his knuckles without even thinking about it. It was basically like breathing to him, at this point. Just pure muscle memory.

Percy settled into an easy, loose stance. When he was younger, he never really focused much on hand-to-hand combat; it was all about bladed weaponry for the teenagers, thank you very much. It was Johnson who first had him work his shit out in a gym instead of on whatever monster had decided to try their luck with him—not that she knew that second part, of course.

“C'mon, Jackson.” She'd muttered, stripping off her jacket. “I need to hit something.” Percy had raised a brow, but followed her nonetheless.

The gym was small, and smelled faintly of mildew and strongly of sweat. But there was nobody else there except for the man taking a nap at the desk, so that was a definite bonus.

“You ever box?”

He shrugged. “Not really.”

Johnson nodded. “Well, you're about to. But first,” he recognized the tell-tale velcro of boxing gloves. “Keep the bag steady for me.”

His first punch echoed across the large room like a shot. Standing like this, now, he could almost imagine he was back in that tiny gym with his pissed off friend after a long day.

“Stupid—fucking—Andrews,” She’d growled, emphasizing every word with a strong jab to the center of the bag.

Percy just listened to her talk. Some things didn’t really need a response; he had a feeling she just needed to get it all out.

His kick caught the side of the bag, sending it swinging away from him.

“Your turn.”

“Excuse me?”

She rolled her eyes. “I did my venting. Now, you. I’ll keep the bag steady.”

“Nah, I’m good. Really.”

Johnson scoffed. “Oh, please.” She sounded exasperated, and, if he listened closely, almost a bit worried. “When was the last time you actually let yourself be angry, Percy?”

He’d just shrugged.

“Hit the damn bag.”

He hit the bag.

Percy didn’t know how long he stayed in that spot, driving his knuckles into the sturdy fabric, again, again, again, and again. Peter had probably long gone to bed, by now. Tony most likely as well. The engineer’s sleep schedule had been improving dramatically in the last couple of months.

Of course, Percy was another story.

He was pulled out of his focus when the lights turned on. Not all of them; just the few surrounding him. Not too bright, either, he didn't think, but he squinted nonetheless, spots dancing across his limited vision.

"Oh," The voice that came from the entrance was hesitant. Extraordinarily so. "I...I didn't know anyone else was in here. Sorry. I'll go."

Percy didn't turn around, but he let his wrapped hands fall to his side. The sound of receding footsteps reached his ears, and he let out a nearly silent breath.

"I don't mind." He said flatly.

Sunday, July 13

1:24 AM

Stark Tower, NY

Bucky hadn't expected anyone to be in the gym. If he had, he would've most definitely stayed in his apartment. He figured since it was so late at night—well, probably early in the morning, now, everyone else would have been asleep.

He'd been up for almost an hour, pacing back and forth in his room before he gave in and decided he needed to burn off some energy.

It was the first time he'd really been around the tower since the day he'd arrived. But Bucky hadn't been the most feared assassin in the world for nothing; he'd memorized the floor layouts inch by inch during the short tour.

The elevator was quiet, moving with only a barely audible whirring noise.

"To the gym, Sergeant Barnes?"

Bucky was only a little embarrassed to admit he'd jumped a little. "Uhm. Yeah, that's the plan, if that's alright..." He tapered off into a question, looking up at the ceiling.

The AI sounded fairly indifferent. "Your current access level permits this." She allowed.

"Erm, thank you."

She didn't reply. Whether that was a personal choice or it was simply because the elevator had arrived, he wasn't sure.

The hallway was dark, even with Bucky's enhanced vision. He made it to the wide doorway with his hands hovering a few inches in front of his chest, just in case he managed to bump into something.

When he turned the corner, though, he took an automatic step back. In the far left corner, a few of the lights were on, casting a dim shadow that stretched lazily across the floors and walls. A long punching bag was hung on a study hook from the ceiling, and its occupant stood, facing away from Bucky.

"Oh," Bucky fumbled. "I...I didn't know anyone else was in here. Sorry. I'll go."

He moved back towards the hall, cringing slightly.

"I don't mind."

It was hard to match the voice to a face, especially with so few. It took Bucky almost an embarrassingly long time to realize it was Jackson's scratchy, slightly accented voice. Bucky blinked a few times. He'd assumed the WSC agent wasn't a usual occupant of the tower. Apparently, he had misjudged.

"...Are you sure?"

Jackson just waved a wrapped hand to the stack of unused bags.

Bucky watched him for a second, apprehension heavy in his gaze. But Jackson didn't pay him any more mind, just returning to beating the ever living hell out of the bag in front of him.

Bucky just followed his lead. The bags were a bit heavier than he anticipated; no problem for a supersoldier like him, but it certainly gave him a new perspective on how hard Jackson was hitting the one in front of him, each strike pushing it back into the wall.

To his surprise, his own hits didn't make the bag buckle and groan like usual. Combined with the unusual weight, Bucky couldn't help the silent awe. Trust Stark to even have supersoldier friendly workout equipment.

As he settled into an easy rhythm, he could practically feel the voices creep back over his shoulders, up the back of his neck, into his ears.

Желание. Longing.

He brought his knee up, driving it into the center of the bag.

Ржавый. Rusted.

He slammed his forearm against it.

Семнадцать. Seventeen.

Рассвет. Daybreak.

Right hook.

Печь. Furnace.

His heart rate was picking up, and not from the workout.

Девять. Nine.

Bucky could practically see him, now, standing above him.

Добросердечный. Benign.

He was holding the book. That stupid book, the bold star emblazoned right in the center. The Soldier(?) was in the chair, that same chair, *again*, and he knew soon that he would be himself no more.

Возвращение на Родину. Homecoming.

Karpov *loomed*, smiling, opening his mouth to say that one last word, to finish—

A noise loud enough to make him flinch pulled him out of it. Heart racing, Bucky turned to the side, his eyes wide but his brow drawn low.

Jackson stood there, next to a pile of overturned weights. “My bad.” The man said flatly, without a hint of remorse.

Bucky didn’t respond, too busy desperately pulling in air like he was about to drown. His chest *ached*, and his hands were trembling. He did his best to give the other man the barest hint of a smile. He doubted it looked very convincing. Jackson didn’t seem to care, though. He just turned away and started unwrapping the long strips of fabric from his hands.

He’d long gotten over the embarrassment of his own trauma. But almost having a whole episode, just like that, in the gym? Especially in front of a WSC member was probably the worst place for it. Fuck, Bucky should have just stayed in his apartment.

“What should I call you?”

“...What?” Bucky croaked.

Jackson looked over at him for the first time. Now, Bucky could see the dark circles under his eyes, the deeply tired look etched into his face. And now that he was looking, Bucky noted he was clad in sweats and a shirt that was just a little bit too big. It was a deep red, and whatever was on the front had long since faded. Pajamas, most likely.

“The princess calls you Sergeant Barnes. Your first name is James. People mostly call you Bucky, though, to my knowledge. So, what do you want me to call you?”

Huh. That was the longest Bucky had ever heard Jackson speak. There was definitely an accent there; the strong underlay of Manhattan, most likely born and raised. It reminded Bucky of home, embarrassingly enough.

He’d been called Bucky pretty much all his life, by pretty much everyone he knew. That day on the highway, when Steve had first looked at him and whispered his name, The Soldier had been shaken. But, deep, deep down, in a part of himself that had been beaten down for over eighty years, he felt like crying.

He hadn’t been called that in close to a century. But he hadn’t been called James in even longer, since before he’d joined the army.

“Bucky is fine. I...I don’t mind James either.”

Jackson nodded shortly. He didn’t introduce himself; whether it was because he really didn’t mind going by Jackson or he simply didn’t want to, Bucky didn’t know. A mixture of both, likely. He understood; exchanging first names would imply a level of familiarity.

Bucky didn’t want to get close to anyone. And, luckily for him, Jackson seemed to have the same idea.

“I’ll leave you to it.” Bucky blinked, and Jackson was standing at the doorway. He couldn’t help but flinch. Had he really been so lost in himself he didn’t even notice the man moving? Jackson was most definitely capable, sure—Bucky could see it in the way he walked, the steady tones of his voice—but people didn’t sneak by the Winter Soldier. Not even Romanoff could. It just didn’t happen.

He really needed to be paying more attention. Just because he was here to get help didn’t mean it

was safe.

Jackson paused, just before stepping into the hallway. Like before, he wasn't facing Bucky. "You should sleep. FRIDAY gets touchy if you don't."

He walked out, leaving Bucky reeling.

Chapter End Notes

mrs oleary bucky moment coming up in a few chapters, dw

demigods just. being casually really fucking tall on average.

capt johnson backstory <3

also!! i got nominated for the irondad creator awards!

there's more info on their tumblr - @irondad-creator-awards

ill hold percy and bucky's wellbeing in exchange for votes and nominations. this is a threat.

whoever nominated me in the first place, thank you so much!

percy just deadass walking over and kicking a giant pile of weights over to snap bucko out of it-

Ontario?

Chapter Summary

FRIDAY calls Bucky down to the lab out of nowhere.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tuesday, July 15

10:24 AM

Stark Tower, NY

When Tony walks in, Percy is sitting on the couch, his shoulders tense. There's a pile of papers balanced on his lap, but he doesn't seem to be paying much attention to them. As Tony gets closer, he notices Percy's jaw is clenched so hard it looks painful.

The TV is turned low, but Tony knows Percy's keen ears pick it up no problem.

“—our people. Our world, our safety.” Presidents Alexander Landry's face is stern, resolute, but his eyes are cruel ones. “To keep our people safe, to protect my fellow Americans. I cannot, in good faith, *will not*, allow this epidemic to—”

With a swift hand, Tony grabs the remote and mutes it. He opens his mouth to speak, but Percy beats him to it.

“An *epidemic*, Tony. That's what he's calling us now.”

The engineer sighs, lowering himself down onto the seat beside Percy. “Why are you listening to that shit, Perce?”

“How can I not?” The demigod runs an agitated hand through his hair. “Tony, he's putting out a vote for the Enhanced Amnesty Act to be repealed. *The Enhanced Amnesty Act.*”

“You know it won’t pass.”

“That sure as *hell* doesn’t make this any better!” Percy snaps. He roughly shoves the stack of documents off his legs in favor for beginning to pace back and forth in front of the coffee table. “Gods, Tony I just—” He breaks off, fists clenching.

Tony leans forward, rubbing his thumb in between his brow. “I know, I know.” He mutters. Ever since President Landry began his term, it was pretty much all that had been in the news. The man was a fervent supporter of enhanced regulation, suppression, and eventually registration.

Outside his inauguration, stands set up with hats that read *BRING HUMANS BACK ON TOP!*

“No, you don’t. You’ll never get it, Tony.” His voice cracks. “Not like I do.” Percy stops his pacing, suddenly seeming so much smaller. “If he gets what he wants, if registration starts up...” Percy shook his head frantically. He points in the direction of the TV. “That right there? He just banned enhanced people from serving in the military. The fucking military, Tony, because it ‘might make other soldiers feel unsafe’.”

He leans his head back. “That’s my fucking government. The people I work for.”

Slowly, Tony gets up, approaches Percy. He’s careful when he wraps an arm around the demigod’s shoulders, even more so when he pulls him in for a hug. Ever since Ontario, Percy had been a bit cagey about contact. But now, the man just leaned into it, resting his forehead on Tony’s shoulder.

“It’s immigrants, then gay people, and now it’s the enhanced.” He whispers into Tony’s shirt. “I’m tired of the people I’m fighting for calling me a fucking epidemic, Tony.”

And really, there’s nothing Tony can say to that.

Tuesday, July 15

1:34 PM

Wakandan Royal Palace, Wakanda

Ever since Barnes had left, people had been treading around Steve like a bomb about to go off.

Wilson had all-out refused to even speak with him. Either Natasha hadn't noticed how close he was with Barnes, or Wilson was just a generally good person. A strange thing, nowadays, but the more probable conclusion. Not much escaped Natasha, even during her unwilling retirement.

Maximoff had been following after him, always a few feet behind, a permanently petulant expression on her face. She hadn't spoken to Natasha in days, ever Natasha had snarked at her during Steve and Barnes's big fight.

(Natasha was completely fine with this.)

Clint had stayed stuck by Natasha's side pretty much the whole time, oddly quiet. The two of them spent most of their time, even more than normal, in either her room or his.

They'd mailed back a response the next day after getting Jackson's letter. Natasha, as always, was the one to write it. Clint, despite all the years of her attempting to rectify it, still had the penmanship of a toddler.

I'm fine. So is Clint.

He'll probably take the deal. He seems caged up, here. Dosen't spend a lot of time around anyone.

We haven't told him anything. Don't plan on it, either.

We heard there was a new WSC division. Is it true?

-NR

She'd written and sent it almost two weeks ago, so it was most likely a day or two away from him. She sort of wished she'd waited to send it, waited until after Barnes left, so she could ask about

him. They weren't friends, but she couldn't deny she was worried about him.

She'd debated sending another letter, but knew it was outside the realm of possibilities. Sending a single letter undetected was hard enough; her contacts were already in route to him. By the time they got the second letter through, Jackson would have already responded to the first.

To her left, Clint let out a loud sigh, sinking further into the couch. Like always, he seemed to know exactly what was on her mind. "How d'ya think Barnes is doing?"

Natasha leaned forward, cupping her chin in her palm. "I don't know." She admitted. "Well, I hope. I think BARF is a good chance for him."

He nodded. "I'm more worried about Stark, to be honest. We all know how it went the last time the two of them met."

Slowly raising a brow, she turned towards him. "What do you mean?"

Clint gave a loose shrug. "Y'know. He went kinda ballistic last time he saw Barnes. I get it, of course, I really do. It's just a little weird Stark spent all that time making BARF, and then offered to host Barnes. I just have my doubts."

Catching a glance of her expression, Clint put his hands up. "I don't want to! I just... I can't help it."

Natasha just shook her head. Contrary to her fired up expression, her voice was quiet. "He deserves more credit than that."

Clint opens his mouth, but nothing comes out. Natasha goes on. "He's never done anything like that to make us mistrust him. He'd never pretend to help Barnes like that. Tony Stark is many things, but a liar is not one of them." She curled into herself a little. "Not like me."

Because, down to the root of the problem, that's it, isn't it? At the core of herself, Natasha is just a liar. To others, to herself. She's lied for so long, Natasha barely even knows what's true anymore. When she says so out loud, Clint gets a look on his face she immediately hates. It reminds her of that one time they were on a mission and he found an abandoned puppy in a box behind a bar.

Scooching closer, Clint wraps a strong arm around her shoulders, pulling her close to his side. “Yeah. Maybe... no, not maybe. We were wrong about a lot, Nat. You’re right. Especially with Stark.” He admits. “We were wrong, and we messed up. But,” He smiles. “We still got time. And about not knowing what’s true anymore?”

Clint leans in and plants an obnoxiously loud kiss on her forehead. “If you gotta know one thing, know I’m always going to be here for you, Nat.”

She wants to reply, to say something back, but finds her voice catching in her throat. She fights down the urge to turn away, to hide the wet sheen of her eyes. It’s instinct to do so, but it’s *Clint*.

Natasha’s arms circle around his torso, and she lets herself be pulled into a hug.

Tuesday, July 15

2:44 PM

Stark Tower, NY

FRIDAY calls Bucky down to the lab out of nowhere.

As he makes his way into the elevator, his mind wanders. It can’t be his first BARF session; Shuri promised she’d be there for that.

As the doors open and FRIDAY directs him towards one of the labs, Bucky can’t help the dread seeping down his spine. When the doors automatically open for him, he’s half expecting Stark to be standing there, a grim look on his face. *We figured out you aren’t compatible for this, time to pack up and go back to Wakanda*, he’d say.

And Bucky would be right back where he started. Regretting the day he dared to hope.

But when he steps into the lab, taking a second to look around, it’s not at all what he expected.

First off, the lab itself just about steals the breath from his lungs. High walls and tall ceilings, everything is painted a bright, crisp color that just screams *modern*. Tables with glossy black finishes are dotted throughout the room, and he can see one of them projecting some sort of hologram into the air, hovering about a foot above the tabletop.

There's countless workbenches and half-assembled projects, tools and parts Bucky couldn't even place a name to just lying on the ground. Blueprints, schematics, and notes written in a messy scrawl float around as well, stuck to walls or laying in stacks.

Second, is that Dr. Stark didn't even seem to be expecting him. He's standing off to the side, near the back of the room, and seems to be in a very intense conversation with Commander Jackson.

“—I know, Gods above, I *know* .” Jackson murmurs lowly.

“You need to take a break.” Stark insists. “I get this is important, I really do, after what happened in Ontario—” He breaks off immediately, wincing, like he didn't even intend for the words to come out of his mouth.

The far more interesting, and almost concerning, reaction is the one belonging to Commander Jackson. At the mention of Ontario, his face, which before held a resigned, exasperated look, goes completely blank. His skin loses a bit of color, and he stiffens.

“Shit, I'm sorry—I shouldn't have—” Stark begins. It's then he notices Bucky.

Stark stares at him for a second, then at Jackson, who, in the last few seconds, has regained his composure astoundingly fast.

Bucky knows better than to pry, especially now. He doesn't ask what happened, nor the significance of Ontario of all places. He just does a little awkward shuffle and looks up at Stark. “Friday said you wanted to see me?”

“Right.” Stark murmurs, and then he's moving forward, towards one of the tables, beckoning for Bucky to follow.

Jackson takes a few steps back, leaning against the wall. His head is tilted ever so slightly down towards the floor, but, for the oddest reason, Bucky doesn't feel for a second like he isn't watching.

“Just a few diagnostic tests.” Stark says. He’s not looking at Bucky; whether that’s because he’s simply focused on the task at hand, or because he just can’t bring himself to, Bucky doesn't know.

The tests don’t take long, but it seems like eternity. Every single second is stuffed to the brim with that sort of stifling tension, neither man saying anything.

Bucky wanted to apologize, he wanted to fall down in front of Stark and beg for forgiveness. But he knew, deep down, he didn’t deserve it.

So the two of them stay silent, both wanting to apologize but both holding their tongues. One from guilt, the other to keep the secret of a friend.

And Percy, Percy stands against the wall, every bit the sentinel he is named after. He stands, he waits, and he listens.

Wednesday, July 16

9:52 AM

The Hub, NY

Ross is sitting in the break room, curled up on the couch, nursing a cup of surprisingly good coffee, when he notices it. Stamped across the top of the paper, in old black ink.

PROJECT INTEGRITY

He furrows his brow, slowly straightening out and leaning forward, placing his mug on a coaster. In the week they’d been pouring over pretty much every relevant thing they had, never once had Ross seen anything about this.

He goes to Dan first. Abandoning the coffee completely, he scoops all the papers into his arms in a haphazard pile and all but runs into the computer lab.

As soon as he enters, Dan slips the headphones off, around his neck, and swivels in his chair. One look from Ross, and the easygoing look on his face fades. “What did you find?”

He puts the keywords into every database he has, but comes up with nothing. Every single time.

They call Lee next. She wanders off to make some calls, and comes up empty. They rinse and repeat with Aspen, then with Mal. It’s with Bridgette they finally strike gold.

“It’s weird, right?” Mal mutters, leaning over the back of Dan’s chair, eyes not moving from the computer screen. “There should definitely be more on this.”

Ross hums in agreement. He’s looking over that same report, again and again, trying to find anything he missed the first dozen times. “Maybe this is what we’re looking for? I mean, Jackson was pretty vague about it.”

To that, Aspen makes a disgruntled noise. “Maybe.”

It’s silent for a long moment, and Ross shifts towards one of the few lamps in the room, angling his shoulders to get more light.

“You know something.” Lee’s voice is flat, tone accusatory. Ross looks up, eyes wide.

Bridgette is standing by the wall, her mouth open in a silent protest. But Lee is standing there, bracing her arms on the back of the couch, staring at her intently. “You’re sweating.”

She reaches up a hand and wipes at her forehead. “No, I’m not.” Bridgette denies instantly.

Mal is looking up, now, a single eyebrow raised. “What did you find?”

“Nothing!”

Everyone is looking at her now, faces expectant. Bridgette groans, hiding her face behind her clipboard. "I can't tell you! I'm sorry!"

Ross boos. Dan pulls a face. "Fine." He sighs. "We can't find anything anyways, so we'll just take it to the Commander when he gets back."

Among the grumbles of agreement, Mal frowns. "Where is he, anyways?"

Aspen shrugs. "Somewhere boring, probably. You know how he is."

Wednesday, July 16

6:07 PM

Dubai, Untied Arab Emirates

"Emmanuel Dredov!" His voice is so loud it echoes, bouncing off the high concrete walls. "Last warning! Come out with your hands behind your head!"

Silence.

Iron Man and War Machine exchange a look, exchanging raised eyebrows despite the metal faceplates. A few meters ahead of them, Sentinel sighs, turning away from the door. Iron Man would almost think he was giving up, if he didn't know the demigod better than that.

As he does a sharp spin, leg coming up, Iron Man can't help the sigh.

Sentinel roundhouse kicks down the door with so much strength it completely breaks off the hinges, falling inward onto the floor, dust clouding up around it. He pulls his sword out from its place on his back, the cold gray metal glinting under the harsh sunlight.

It's bright out, and stiflingly hot. Both Tony and Rhodey have temperature regulators inside the suit; and while Sentinel's own armor is exceptionally functional, Tony knows for a fact that it does not. How Percy isn't dying of heatstroke in all those heavy layers, he'll never know. The redesign suits him well, though. Out of the Deathstroke armor, it's a bit strange to see him in the field. Certainly not a bad thing, though.

The Sentinel armor is less heavy, even less bulk than the mercenary gear. Most of the core design elements stay the same; the almost cargo-like pants, sturdy boots, a high-necked, form-fitting shirt with long sleeves. But now, instead of pitch black and a barely lighter gray, the team had agreed on a black and red color scheme for all their gear. *For the aesthetic*, Ross had declared.

The helmet was different, now, too; smoother, straying even further from the shape of a human face from the front. Impassive, dark.

Sometimes, in the right light, the red under black armor made it look like he was drenched in blood.

The villa rests on sprawling green grounds; a considerable feat, considering the harsh climate. They'd staked it out beforehand, using one of Tony's drones. The gardens ended at a sharp descent down a rocky mountain towards a sun-bleached beach, a staircase built into the cliffside for access.

Tony guessed it was originally supposed to be a private sector of the beach for the owners of the villa. Now, it held a few dark, branching out docks for ships to quietly anchor in.

The two split up, Tony going to follow Sentinel and War Machine flying off in the other direction.

Repulsers readied, they fan out over the expanse of the house. It's absolutely humongous, easily one of the biggest and nicest on the block. And considering the house they passed on the way in had been made of what looked like solid marble...that was saying something.

Tony couldn't help the derisive scoff as he cleared the next room. The decoration was so tacky, honestly. Who in their right minds would put a red satin couch against an eye-searingly yellow wall?

"Shit looks like a McDonalds playplace." Tony muttered.

Over the line, he could hear two identical snorts.

It's then he hears the loud crash. Sentinel's yell comes over the line, and concern shoots through Tony like a burning needle. He drops the photo frame he was looking at, bursting into the adjacent dining room.

But then he remembers it's *Percy*. Emmanuel Dredov is in a firm armlock, and Sentinel's other hand is gripping a fistful of his hair, mashing his face down into the equally hideous dining room table.

"Where are they?"

Dredov stays silent. Sentinel, grip still strong, yanks his head off of the smooth wood and slams it back down with a snarl. Dredov cries out, and Tony hears the broken *crunch* of his nose from the doorway.

"I'm going to ask you one more time." His voice is unnervingly calm, but rage shakes in his shoulders.

Dredov spits out something incomprehensible into the table.

Tony's comm crackles to life. "We got incoming from the north. Six vans—no, seven. Tinted windows. Reinforced, I think." Rhodey's voice reports. "Heat signatures estimate at least 40."

Tony swears. He looks up at Sentinel, a silent question. With a grumble, the demigod kicks the back of Dredov's knees, and the man crumples to the floor in a pained heap.

"We stay."

Tony raises an eyebrow. "Are you sure?"

Sentinel crosses his arms thoughtfully. "This is the first real lead we've had in weeks. We'll wait it out." Then, he crouches down, and grips Dredov's jaw. "And that means we, my friend, are on a time limit."

The new helmet, like the old, covers his entire head and face; but Dredov doesn't have to see his expression to shiver.

Chapter End Notes

nat's having and identity crisis yuh

clintasha friendship,,,,,,

SWORD: yeah, commander jackson is probably doing like. paperwork or something boring. poor guy

percy: *kicking down the door of a mansion with his buddies, swords out*

so yeah! percy get's a new fit B)

some more vivid imagery:

black combat boots, and black cargo/tac pants if you know what i mean. lots of pockets.

a high necked and long sleeved blood red shirt. like, imagine the top of the nightwing suit without the gloves. overtop, he wears black armor, all made out of a kevlar blend, nothing metal. he also wears reinforced wrist braces and fingerless gloves with metal plating on the knuckles cause he likes punching people xoxo

also. weapon holsters to the max. like seriously, percy almost has a problem. includes: sword on back, twin knives on each thigh, a dagger strapped to his chest, knives that come out of the soles of his boots, a thin cable/wire that tyson made that functions like a fucking garrote, plus like 70 other knives that he keeps in case he loses the other ones

The Girl Next Door

Chapter Summary

“If we go rogue,” Tony finished softly, “we’re on our own. No extraction team.”

“We can’t leave them.” Percy’s voice was raw.

He turned towards the window.

“Council be damned.”

Chapter Notes

TW FOR THIS CHAPTER: mentions of sexual abuse of a minor. nothing graphic, but it's implied. If you wish to skip it, go to the first linebreak.

Edit: Sallow has made some REALLY COOL fanart for this story! you can find it in my gifts section! its really cool art and you guys should 100% check it out and shout loving things at them!!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wednesday, July 16

6:18 PM

Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Percy remembers the first person he killed.

The first, purposeful one with his own two hands, one who didn’t explode into golden dust.

He used to think Luke’s sword was horrible. *Celestial Bronze and mortal steel, so it can harm both.* Percy had been twelve years old and so, so naive. “Why would anyone want to hurt a mortal? Why would anyone prepare for that?” He’d asked Grover, laying in the infirmary with a brand new

shiny scar on his palm.

The satyr had just sighed and shook his head.

As Percy grew older, and angrier, he'd slowly come to get it. Or maybe he always had.

When his mother told him about the statue she had sold, he'd laughed. Maybe that's where it started.

He'd been nineteen years old, just having begun to live alone. The first few nights, everything had been full of his friends and family, their heartbeats, their breathing, their soft voices and loud laughter.

It was a week in when he was alone for the first time. When he first heard it.

Laying in the dark on his bed, Mrs. O'Leary snoring by his feet, he couldn't sleep. Because through the walls, he could hear crying. It was so quiet and soft, the voice of a young girl. She sounded like Estelle for a second, he couldn't help but notice.

He fell asleep not long after she did.

Percy wakes up early, and spends the next three days cleaning up after a landslide caused by a bomb made with alien components in Austria. He gets home well past midnight, drops his duffel on the floor, and goes straight to bed.

She's crying again.

Again, Percy stays awake until she stops.

The third time, a week later, he hears her speak for the first time.

She's praying.

It's a strange thing for Percy to hear, to lay there and listen to her pray to a God he hasn't met.

It goes on, and on, and on. Every few nights, because lately, that's the only time Percy is home, he hears her cry, hears her pray.

He's been living there for just shy of a month when he's home in the middle of the day for the first time.

She's in her room, and she isn't alone. The man is bigger than her, so much bigger, and she's begging and pleading and crying. Eventually, she falls silent, tears choking her.

As soon as the man is gone, she prays again. Begs for it to stop, pleads to Him to help her.

Percy has never really believed in that girl's God. How can he? The simple idea of a being out there, perfect and ever-loving, has never made sense for him. He knows his Gods, who are cruel and ignorant, and so, incredibly human. But sometimes, he likes to think about it. Because it's a nice thought. That somewhere out there, there is somebody looking out for them all.

But listening to what happened in the apartment next door, and it happened so *fast*, Percy decided it doesn't matter. Because if her God is the way she thinks He is, He would never allow something like this to happen.

It made him remember that his own first monster was really just a man. Percy had forgotten that. That monsters and men weren't distinguishable by looks but by heart. And that demigods weren't the only ones who had to deal with them.

That night, he doesn't even try to sleep. Instead, he waits, he plans, and he listens.

Because Percy heard too much. Even before it was what he relied on, when he just dreamed things he shouldn't. He spent far too long listening to that little girl fall to her knees, crying out for a God's help that would never come. She wasn't like him. She didn't know better. She didn't call to his Gods, sure, but to a God all the same.

The God's little errand boy, Polybotes had sneered.

That's when he gets his first blade of mortal steel, because Percy had never been one to wait for a God.

He finds the man by voice, by heartbeat, the next day. He's teetering back and forth in an alley, slurring his words and calling out cruel things to passing people.

He never sees Percy coming. And it's Hell's Kitchen, so Percy knows nobody will look too much into a drunk with his throat slit in an alley.

He tips off the police. Anonymously, of course.

The next time he goes back to his apartment, two officers are sitting in the living room next door. The little girl is crying again, but this time, it's out of relief. Her grandparents are there, ready to take custody, and by the time she finishes her story, they are all sobbing.

Her grandparents sell the apartment. They promise that never, never will she have to go back there.

The officers leave, and her grandfather packs her a bag.

Percy is getting ready to take Mrs. O'Leary out on a walk, his back turned to the hallway, locking his door, when he actually meets her for the first time.

She asks if she can pet his dog, and he just smiles and says *of course*.

It's as her grandparents, their hearts beating steady and true when they said *they didn't know, they're so sorry, they'll take care of her and love her with **everything** they have*, lead her down the rickety old staircase, away from the apartment, out of Hell's Kitchen, to some nice suburb in Queens, does Percy really think about it.

If that girl was right, that there really was all a bigger plan to this, that somebody really was watching out for them...

Well, maybe her God had answered her prayer almost a decade before it was uttered, when a little

boy read his mother's letter about a missing husband and laughed.

It's been almost seven years since that day, but Percy has never forgotten it. How can he, when he keeps finding himself in situations like this?

Emmanuel Dredov is a pathetic excuse of a human, curled up and sniveling on the ground. Percy feels no pity. Not for him.

As always, the knife fits in his palm like it was fate.

He leans down, getting close enough to his face to smell the salty tears building up in his eyes. "Who's in the vans?"

"I don't know!"

Percy adjusts his hold on Dredov's chin, tilting it upwards. He pressed the cold steel of the blade right into his Adam's apple. "Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying!" The man whimpers.

"Try again." He draws a single bead of blood, slowly dripping down the man's neck. Normally, he would be more merciful, here. But not to this man, who's heartbeat pounded in Percy's ears. Not when Percy had been having dreams of screaming children, tiny bodies tossed overboard and burned into ashes, Emmanuel Dredov watching with half a mind while he counted a stack of bills.

"Fine, fine! God, fine!" Dredov struggled in his grip, but Percy didn't let up. "They're here to move the shipment."

Percy could hear Tony's breath stutter, still in the entryway. There were only supposed to be a dozen guards, max.

"Looks like they've heard about us." Rhodey said through the comms.

Made sense. Percy had been carving a bloody canyon through Hydra's network of Enhanced children traffickers. Ever since Ontario, a dozen kids missing and *nobody noticed*, Percy had been on a one man mission to take down the entire ring himself.

Tony leaned against the doorframe. And he was doing a pretty good job of it, he'd say.

"How's the shipment coming in?"

"By boat." Dredov said quickly. "At seven."

Right after sundown, then. Moving in the cover of darkness.

"Lea, watch him." Percy muttered, releasing Dredov and moving across the room to Tony. The hellhound trotted across the hardwood floors, her tongue lolling out the side of her mouth. As soon as she got in sight of Dredov, it was like her entire demeanor changed. Her lips pulled back into a snarl, her eyes narrowing. And, Tony was fairly sure he imagined it, but it almost looked like she got a little bit bigger.

Mrs. O'Leary sat down only a foot away from Dredov, glittering dark eyes not leaving his face.

Percy, confident in her abilities, had no problem facing away from the trafficker. "We can't let this shipment go through, Tony." Calling it a *shipment* left a foul taste in his mouth.

"I know. Do we have enough time?"

Percy checked his watch. "Boat is here in thirty minutes. He's not lying. If we dispatch the incoming guards, maybe..." He trailed off. "War Machine, what's the ETA on the vans?"

Over the line, Rhodey pursed his lips. "I'd give it twenty minutes, no more."

Almost simultaneously, Tony and Percy swore.

He could feel the pull of the ocean, down the cliff and across the sands. Distantly, there were tiny ripples in the water; he couldn't feel the boat, not yet, but it was most definitely coming.

The Council said they needed to be in and out with Dredov. They hadn't known about the boat coming in, nor the beefed up armed transport. Even with the new situation, they were just supposed to call the extraction team in.

Under no circumstances were they to stay in that villa, engage with the transport vans or the guards inside.

Percy's nails bit into his gloved palm. "If we don't grab Dredov and leave before they get here..." Iron Man looked up at him. "That's the mission. Nobody was supposed to see us."

There's still a chance. To complete the mission.

"If we go rogue," Tony finished softly, "we're on our own. No extraction team."

He could almost hear Fury's angry voice in his head. *Can't you follow a goddamned order for once in your life, Jackson?*

Not this one, Percy wanted to reply. Not ones like this.

"We can't leave them." Percy's voice was raw.

He turned towards the window.

"Council be damned."

The smile in Tony's voice was evident. "Knew you'd say that."

They waited there, in complete silence only broken by updates from Rhodey, until the rumble of SUV treads met their ears. Or, more accurately, Sentinel and Mrs. O'Leary's. Tony watched,

slightly bemused, as they both tilted their heads to the side in sync.

Without missing a beat, Percy patted his thigh, and the hellhound let up on her warden duties, trotting over to his side. He met her in the middle, making it to Dredov in a few long strides.

Sentinel grabbed him by the collar, hauling up off the floor to dangle a few inches in the air with a single hand. Tony couldn't help the slight eyebrow raise. Percy was usually pretty tame with his strength in an effort to avoid suspicion. When he was good and pissed, though...

He shook Dredov like a snowglobe. "Look at me." He snapped. The man snapped out of his pain-fueled daze, eyes wide. Sentinel pulled Dredov close to his face, the dark, completely useless eyeholes of his helmet only a few inches away from his face.

"What do you want? Is it money? You can have all the profits, I swear—"

He received a hair raising growl in return. "I don't want your fucking blood money."

Dredov whimpered. Tony smiled.

Behind them, the doorbell rang. Dredov's eyes widened. He began to blubber out something unintelligible, and Sentinel scoffed in disgust, dropping the man back down to the floor. He crouched down to be level with him.

"Answer the door, Emmanuel." He said calmly, the slightest twinkle in his eye.

"W-What?"

Percy pulled the xiphos off his back, giving it a short twirl in his hand. "You heard me." He pointed at the door with the blade. "You're going to go up to that door, act like everything is normal, and you're going to accept the shipment. Try anything, and..." Here, Tony knew he was smiling behind the helmet. "Well, Mrs. O'Leary missed dinner to be here."

Tony took that as his cue, taking a step out of the foyer, behind a sharp corner, out of sight. He was getting increasingly glad they'd forcefully entered through one of the side doors instead of the

front.

Mrs. O'Leary bared her teeth at the quaking man, who stumbled to his feet and then to the door. Hands shaking, he slid open a small compartment, revealing a peephole. Dredov pressed his eye to it, then fumbled the deadbolt open.

He looked over at Sentinel, who clearly had no inclination to budge from his spot in clear view, against the wall.

A bold move, Tony noted. Not like he expected anything else from Percy, though.

Dredov swallowed thickly and stepped back, letting the door swing wide open. It was dark outside, the barest hints of sunlight slowly disappearing. The view was mostly obscured by the small army standing in the doorway, though.

The man in front, clearly the leader of the squadron based off the pin on his lapel, raised a sole eyebrow at Sentinel. "*Who is this?*" He said in sharp Arabic. FRIDAY translated it with a slightly mocking tone.

"*Extra security.*" Percy said smoothly. His tone was impassive, bored, like he really couldn't bother to give this squadron leader the time of day. His Arabic was damn near flawless, leaving Tony slightly dumbfounded.

Lapel Pin narrowed his eyes. "*We were not informed of this.*" His hand crawled towards his gun.

He just received a loose shrug. "*Desperate times. You have heard of the recent attacks, yes? I am simply here as a...contingency.*"

Dredov offered nothing to the contrary, discreetly wiping a sweaty palm on his trousers. He just took a few more steps back, waving a hand for the rest of the men to enter. "*We do not have time to waste. The shipment will arrive in mere minutes.*"

Lapel Pin's posture relaxed minutely, and he stepped over the threshold, his subordinates following him. Tony pressed himself further against the other wall, but it seemed his worry was for naught. Not a single man bothered to look around in the slightest, instead hurrying across the villa, to the gardens out back.

Every single one was wearing military fatigues. Upon further inspection, not real ones. But close enough to fool most people. All armed; most with a variety of rifles, a few with smaller guns. Their boots were dusty and coated in sand, leaving marks all over the floors and carpets. Tony wrinkled his nose.

Percy stayed up front, walking just a few paces behind Dredov and Lapel Pin. His sword stayed in his hand, a constant pressing reminder.

As they disappeared from the foyer, into the living room, and then eventually the kitchen, Tony spoke. “Rhodey? We’ve got 32 exactly. Must’ve left some behind with the vans. You got ‘em?”

“You know I do.” Came his friend’s smug voice. Tony rolled his eyes. “Make it quiet, sugarplum.”

He was fairly sure if he could see Rhodey, he would be sticking his tongue out at him.

“Turning on thermal, boss.”

Instantly, three dozen orange blobs appeared on his HUD. Well, more exactly, thirty-one orange ones and a single deep, rich red one. Tony made a curious noise in the back of his throat. “That Perce?”

“Indeed it is.”

“Huh. Thanks, Fri.”

Was it a demigod thing? It had to be—nobody was naturally that warm. From Tony’s understanding, though limited, demigods had different aspects based on their parentage. Percy hadn’t touched on it much, but what he had, Tony remembered vividly.

Stuff like War God kids being oddly tall and Sky God kids being made of less dense tissues. To fly, apparently, which... *Jesus Christ*.

What purpose would increased body temperature have? Practical, like lightweight bones, or just a feature like height?

A trait from a Fire or Sun God, or something needed for the child of an Ice, Winter, or similarly themed God? Tony wasn't quite sure how Percy's odd storm ability would fit into either of those, but the possibilities were truly endless.

You couldn't draw correct conclusions when you only had the tiniest bit of the data, after all.

Shaking himself out of it, Tony slowly crept across the villa, silently cursing the suit's lack of ground stealth. For Percy's sake, he left a good distance between the two groups. They'd have to go down the cliff, anyways.

By now, their extraction team must've realized they weren't coming. How long until they called the Council?

Personally, Tony couldn't give any less fucks. He was a billionaire, it's not like they could or *would* do anything to him anyways. Not when he and his company were one of their main benefactors of tech. But Percy, he was a little concerned about.

He knew Percy's morals were more rigid than his sense of duty. Now more than ever. It was a side effect from his SHIELD days. Over time, Percy had let enough slip for Tony to paint a particularly vivid picture of what had happened.

A nineteen year old boy, trying to do whatever he could to get ahead, so another Battle of New York would never happen, so he could protect his family, made a deal with the devil and joined up with a shady agency. And sometimes, they asked him to do things he didn't agree with.

And one day, he found out some of the things he did were much worse than he thought, because the people he'd been doing them for were the people they were trying to fight against. And nobody believed him.

When Tony thought about it too much, it made him want to hit something. Percy was just a kid; he shouldn't have had to make those decisions in the first place. But when he and Peter sat on the end of Percy's hospital bed that cold January day, Tony learned that Percy hadn't really been a kid in a long time.

Chapter End Notes

Summary of those who skipped the first part: When Percy first moved into his apartment, he eventually found out the girl next door was being sexually abused. He killed the guy who was doing it—the first person he really killed.

so yuh percy encounters someone hurting children and immediately kills them. king shit.

also some of percy's internal stance on religion and the problems he has w it

percy being really fucking warm is a side affect of being made to live at the literal bottom of the ocean in any climate btw

pov tony knowing he's a rich white man and therefore can do what he wants. chaotic good behavior.

Moonlight

Chapter Summary

The demigod just nodded, jaw clenched. “Where’s Dredov?”

Tony blasted a guard off the side of the ship. “Up here somewhere.”

He received another nod in return, and Percy shot off.

Chapter Notes

TW: blood, minor mentions of gore and death. The plot also features human trafficking.

Italics are other languages!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wednesday, July 16

6:50 PM

Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Percy kept his posture perfectly relaxed as they descended the steep staircase carved into the dark rock of the cliff face. The cacophony of tac boots behind him raised the hairs on the back of his neck, but he tried to pay it no mind.

He could feel the boat, now, too. It was smaller than he expected. Normally that would have been a good thing; less boat meant they had less money. But after spending a few minutes in Dredov’s gaudy villa, Percy knew that was not the case. Whoever bought it just simply didn’t care enough to buy one large enough to fit all the *cargo* comfortably.

The distant whirring of Iron Man’s suit was a comfort, knowing his friend was watching over even now. Next to him, Mrs. O’Leary bumped her nose into his thigh. He rested a light hand on her head, giving her a quick scratch.

However bad it was out here, surrounded by a few dozen armed unfriendlies, he preferred it to the villa.

While it was true Percy mostly relied on his powers, mapping out and feeling for water in things around him, he did use his other senses. Mostly his nose. And that entire villa had smelled overwhelmingly like bleach.

He didn't want to think too much about the implications of that. Of what exactly they had had to clean up.

It was silent the entire way down the steep, steep steps. As far as Percy could tell, it went almost a hundred feet down until they hit the beach.

Despite the circumstances, being next to the water was calming. The familiar feeling of the sand under his boots, the sea breeze tingling against his fingertips—the only exposed skin he had.

Dredov's heart was still going crazy a few feet to his right. Percy's lip curled in distaste. *Spineless.*

The only sounds that greeted them under the blanket of the night was the steady movement of the waves, the ticking of Lapel Pin's watch, and the roaring blood of the men around him.

Percy had no problem striding right to the edge of the docks, Dredov trailing behind him. He tapped his foot on the wood a few times, made a show of crossing his arms in annoyance. "*Fucks sake,*" He muttered in Russian. "*I have places to be. Your boss knows that, correct?*"

Behind him, he heard one of the men translate for Lapel Pin, in what they thought was out of his hearing range. Dredov swallowed thickly, and shrugged. "*He does not control the tides.*" For a pathetic excuse of a human, his voice was surprisingly steady. If Percy was a normal person, he probably would've believed the calm front the man was putting up. "*The ship will arrive, rest assured.*"

Percy just scoffed, shoving his hands into his pockets. "*As long as I get paid,*" He returned.

He didn't need his assurances, though. Percy knew exactly when that boat was going to be there.

Under the pretense of pulling lightly at his collar, trying to stave off the sweltering heat that stubbornly stuck on through the night, he flicked the button on the side of his helmet.

“Muted.” FRIDAY said smoothly.

“Thanks, Fri. Tony, they’re docking in four minutes. Exactly.” Percy tilted his head a little to the right. “Scratch that. Three minutes and fifteen seconds.”

“Seriously, come *on*, you just know shit like that?” Rhodey exclaimed. Tony huffed a quiet laugh.

Percy grinned. “Guys in the vans taken care of?”

“You know it.”

“Well, get ready to get to the beach. Fast. This is gonna turn ugly soon enough.”

“We’ll be there.” Tony promised.

Percy resisted the urge to nod, instead quietly turning off the mute function.

When the boat docked, he took a short step to the side, allowing a group of the men to pass him, anchoring it to the dock. He stayed to the side when they filed one by one up the gangplank. Percy stayed and waited until it was just him, alone with Dredov, standing on the lone dark under the cover of the night.

The demigod jerked his chin towards the ship. “Go on.” He smiled. “I’ll know if you say something.”

Dredov made a noise that sounded like a whimper and scampered onto the ship.

It was a decent size; considerably smaller than the Princess Andromeda, but bigger than the Argo II. Percy slowly crept towards the gangplank, brow furrowed. At least 30 armed, plus the 32 and Dredov that just got on. Normally, Percy wouldn’t be a fan of those odds.

But these stupid motherfuckers were about to try and take on a son of Poseidon on a *boat*.

As he ascended the gangplank, Percy ran a hand up the railing. The guards were posted pretty much everywhere, but he wasn't too worried about being spotted. No doubt that by now, word had spread about the strange man that the Boss had hired to protect the shipment.

Nobody would be stupid enough to try anything with him. Wouldn't want to displease the Boss, of course.

Just slowly wandering through the ship, he did a mental headcount. A few on the observation deck, double that amount on the bridge. Both groups had night vision equipment, presumably. But the rest, scattered across the decks, relied on the lights on the side of the ships. The ones inside most definitely did as well, but that was a situation for later.

He didn't bother to mute this time, choosing to keep his voice low instead as he leisurely walked through the hallway connecting to the captain's quarters, hellhound at his heels.

"I'm in. Going to find the cargo. We've got five on the observation deck, ten on the bridge. Most likely equipped with night vision. Don't let anyone see you."

"I'm sorry, you're *inside*?" Rhodey echoed incredulously.

"Yup."

The two sighs over the line were so identical it was almost comical.

He had no doubts Iron Man and War Machine were flying over anyways, ready to go take care of the fifteen guards Percy had warned about.

Percy kept his stride quick, shoulders squared and spine straight. He didn't even pretend to spare a passing patrol a single glance. Acting like he couldn't bother with a single moment for the passing men was a central part of the act, after all.

The captain's quarters were fairly empty, unfortunately. Chances were, there was something useful in there, either paper or electronic. Percy couldn't really get results with that like he could a person, so he instead busted the lock and had Mrs. O'Leary stand guard inside, just in case someone got wind of the takeover and decided to destroy any evidence.

So next, he moved onto the central staircase. Keeping an ear open for any nearing persons, he descended down into the lower levels of the ship. The further down he went, the warmer it got. By the time he got to the very bottom, it was positively stifling. There was little air circulation, and even the demigod had to take a second to adjust to it, leaning against a wall.

Way above his head, he could hear the pounding footsteps. They echoed and reverberated through the walls, the ceiling, down to his bones. He doubted anyone else could hear nor feel them, though. Truthfully, Percy wasn't completely sure if it was part of his boosted senses, or part of the Earthshaker thing that allowed him to. He'd always been sensitive to vibrations, going so far as being able to feel earthquakes halfway across the world.

He navigated through the increasingly narrow hallways, sidestepping coils of rope and unruly cables. The steady rocking back and forth of the ship didn't bother him; his footing was as steady as ever.

His comm buzzed. "Got all fifteen. You find anyone inside yet?"

Percy huffed softly. "Not yet. I'm as far down as I could go—it's the only space they could keep them." He turned a corner, paused to listen above deck, and then went on. "It's bad down here, Rhodes. *I* can barely breathe down here." His voice was quiet, trembling with a sort of narrowly contained rage.

"Shit," Rhodey's voice sounded deeply tired. "Tones and I are gonna go on with the rest of the guards. Update me?"

"Course."

The line went dead, and Percy pushed on.

He stopped only a minute later, fully halting in his steps like he'd walked face-first into a wall. And, well, the stench hitting him might as well have been one. Percy braced an arm on the wall to his left, holding in a retch. "*Fuck*," He hissed.

Deeply wishing his helmet wasn't in the way of pinching his nose shut, he groaned. And started heading to wherever the hell that smell was coming from. Because, of course, that's where he needed to be.

He kept walking until the sound of the faint buzzing of the lights was replaced by a singular, small, terrified heartbeat. The sound was weak, but hammering so fast it almost gave him a headache.

Percy made his steps purposefully louder as he rounded the corner. There was a thick steel door, secured by bolts the size of his thumb. Percy pressed a palm against the warm metal. The sound was barely noticeable, but he heard the tiny heart pick up from the other side.

He gnawed on the inside of his lip. Chances are, the kid didn't speak English.

“مرحبا؟” He tried.

No response. He sighed. “Привет? ¿Alguien aquí?” He kept his voice soft, gentle. “私は助けるためにここにいます。” Percy promised. *I'm here to help.*

Still, nothing from the other side. Percy took a step back, debating having Mrs. O'Leary shadow travel him into the room—breaking it down most certainly wouldn't help this terrified kid—when he heard it.

“Quem é você?” It was barely above a whisper. The voice was tiny, so soft, and so, so young. Percy's heart ached.

The same young voice, the same way the vowels were just ever so slightly lisped...it reminded Percy of when Estelle spoke Portuguese. His words were suddenly a lot thicker. “Meu nome é Percy. Estou aqui para te levar a um lugar seguro.” *I'm here to get you somewhere safe.*

It's silent for a very long minute, and Percy just about worries he's scared the kid away. He's about to knock again, to call out, when he hears a distinctly wet snuffle.

“Promete?”

“Eu juro pela minha vida.” *On my life.*

The door creaks, slowly, and Percy takes a few big steps back.

It swings open, and he almost gags. He knew, instinctively, that the room they were keeping him in was tiny. But it was worse than he thought—everything *stank*, like rotting food and waste. A wave of stifling heat hit him, and Percy coughed.

The demigod dropped into a crouch, and tried to put a smile into his voice. “*It’s alright, kid. You can come out.*” He said in soft Portuguese.

He only noticed as the kid moved, just how tiny he was. And not just in height—he was as thin as a stick, severely underfed. He was severely dehydrated, too. Gods know what else.

Gingerly, he took a step over the lip of the round door frame. As soon as his feet—*bare*—hit the textured metal floor of the hallway, he flinched. It was a move Percy knew all too well. Drawing your shoulders in, lowering your head, raising your arms. The move of someone who was so small and was going to get hit by someone so much bigger.

Percy stayed perfectly still, patient.

It took a solid few minutes for him to lower his arms. To look at Percy.

His heart didn’t calm, not even for a second. Instead, it sped up sharply.

It was times like this that made Percy really, really wish he could see. He knew, instinctively, that his helmet made him look scary. Dark, like blood, with no vague impression of a face, and dark, dark holes where eyes should have been.

Reaching up, pressing his thumb to the latch on the back, he pulled it off. It made his hair stand up weird, and Percy instinctively smoothed it over. Telegraphing every move, Percy slid the glove off of his right hand. Then, even slower, he held his hand out. “Olá.” He greeted softly. “Qual o seu nome?”

Percy was prepared to wait another few minutes with his hand out, crouched down in front of the kid. He didn't expect for a tiny hand to take his, and then to have an immediate armful of malnourished child.

He didn't hesitate to pull the kid into a strong hug, one hand still holding his discarded glove, arms braced against too prominent shoulder blades.

"Lucas."

The whisper was so soft, like everything else about him, that Percy barely caught it.

"Lucas? Seu nome é Lucas?"

Vigorous nodding against his collar. Percy smiled. "Esse é um nome muito bonito."

He could feel the tears coming freely now, damp on the shoulder of his armor. Percy tilted his head, getting his bearings. There was a fight going on above decks. War Machine and Iron Man had made their presence known.

Murmuring soothing words in Portuguese still, he pulled his glove back on. His hand rested on the back of Lucas's head. "*Don't look, okay? Keep your eyes closed.*" He instructed softly. Lucas nodded, keeping his face buried against him.

In one smooth motion, Percy slid his helmet back on. He adjusted Lucas against his hip, easily supporting his weight with one hand.

The Sentinel walked out of that hallway.

Tony didn't expect to see his friend walk above decks with his sword out, dripping with blood. Now, Tony had known the demigod long enough to be decent at reading his posture; and

everything about Percy Jackson read as positively *apoplectic* . His shoulders tensed, white knuckling the hilt of his xiphos.

As soon as he stepped onto the deck, a lone guard ran at him, gun held in front of him. Sentinel ducked under the shot no problem, spinning and slamming his elbow into his sternum. A truly vicious hit to the head, courtesy of the flat of his blade, and the guard dropped like a rock.

Mrs. O’Leary was nowhere to be seen; probably doing reconnaissance somewhere inside the ship.

(The fact that he could truthfully wave off the dog’s lack of presence as doing *reconnaissance* was something he didn’t want to think too much about.)

Rhodey took one look at Sentinel, and made a choked noise. “Please don’t tell me...” He trailed off, sounding a little sick.

Percy shook his head. “He’s alive. Lea is looking after him. He fell asleep a second ago.”

“He?” Tony repeated.

Sentinel disarmed a smuggler with one hand, swiping across his shooting arm with the other. “Yes, *he*. There’s only one.”

Rhodey swore.

The demigod just nodded, jaw clenched. “Where’s Dredov?”

Tony blasted a guard off the side of the ship. “Up here somewhere.”

He received another nod in return, and Percy shot off. Right then, Tony couldn’t help but wonder once more about his parentage. He didn’t know of a single God’s influence that would make Percy move the way he did. Like a hunter.

Shrugging, Tony disarmed another smuggler. If anyone deserved the fate of being the Sentinel’s

prey, it was Emmanuel Dredov.

Ultimately, leaving Lucas with Mrs. O'Leary was the best option. That didn't mean Percy had to like it, though.

The less blood that kid saw, the better. And nobody could get him out faster than the hellhound, just in case. It still left a bitter taste in his mouth, though. Leaving the kid, curled up on the couch in the empty captain's quarters, the door locked securely.

He'd be fine. Percy would worry about him in a minute.

The demigod took a deep breath of the air. Already, he felt leagues better, out in the fresh sea air, rather than down in that hot, stuffy cell.

Unfortunately, he wasn't taking the time to appreciate his domain, though. Instead, Percy searched the air for something specific. A pathetic, nasty mix of fear, blood, gunpowder.

The treaded soles of his boots hit the docks without a sound. The sea on either side, lightly misting his exposed fingertips. He knew it was dark out, now; Dredov wouldn't get far. Especially not with Sentinel hot on his heels.

Percy, after a moment's consideration, sheathed his sword. He rolled his neck to the side, cracking his shoulders, then shooting off into a sprint. Even running faster than any human ever could, his feet didn't make a sound. Just a shadow on the docks, unnoticeable in the background of Iron Man and War Machine's takeover of the big ship.

He caught up laughably easily. About ten meters, give or take, behind Dredov.

Percy stopped any attempt for stealth. His footsteps thudded against the old wood, echoing around them.

Dredov's heart picked up, not unlike a cornered animal. His breathing increased rapidly.

He followed a few twists and turns, branching out left, right, left. Dredov was breaking for land, towards the cliffside steps, back up into his fancy little villa. When he got within sight of the cliff, Percy decided it was time to stop playing with his food.

Sentinel yanked a hunting knife free of its sheath on his stomach. He gave it a single flip, slowing to a halt. He considered for a moment, tilting his head, taking in the winds and the growing space in between them.

Then, so fast anybody watching would have almost missed it, Percy drew his hand up to the opposite shoulder, knees barely bent, and threw it.

The scent of blood, even more potent than before, hit him in an instant. The strangled cry of Dredov followed just after. Then the thud of a body hitting the wood.

Percy stuck his hands in his pockets and strode forwards, taking his time.

He was fairly sure Dredov was crying. As he crouched down, the waves around them picked up ever so slightly. Behind the helmet, Percy smiled.

“You know,” He started conversationally as he grabbed the hilt of his knife. “They always try to run. It’s never really worked, though.” One hand he used to push down on the back of his head, mashing his face into the docks. The other, he used to roughly yank the hilt out of his shoulder blade. Skin and muscles tore, and the man howled.

Percy wiped the blade on Dredov’s ridiculously expensive jacket. “Now,” He said calmly. “Tell me where all the shipping manifests are, and you might survive the night.”

“W-what?”

“Shipping manifests, order histories, payments, *everything*. And don’t think I won’t know if you lie.”

Dredov seemed to steel himself. “I’m not telling you *shit*.” He spat. Percy hummed. “Someone finally grew some balls.” He dug a hand under Dredov’s shoulder and, with a sharp shove, flipped

him onto his back. Percy twirled the blade in between his gloved fingers. “What if I cut them off?”

The effect was instantaneous. Dredov choked, scrambling backwards. Percy’s hand shot out, grabbing him by his neck. He pointed the blade downwards, and drove it into the wood, right in between Dredov’s legs. “Tell me where everything is, or I’ll cut your dick off.” He said flatly.

“You’re psychotic,” Dredov breathed. Percy bared his teeth in a smile. “That doesn't sound like a location.” He yanked the knife out of the wood.

“Fuck, fine, *fine*, just d—don’t touch me, you *freak*,” He spat. Percy tilted his head slowly to the side, indicating he was listening.

The trafficker took in a few shaky breaths before speaking. “Everything is in the c—captain’s rooms, I swear. A—All of the paperwork. It’s all in there.”

Percy hummed.

“I *swear*,” The man pleaded.

“And the rest of the children?”

The question seemed to throw Dredov off. “The...the rest?”

“Three weeks ago, there were five. Now there’s only one. What happened?”

“I— We— The others,” He managed. “They took them, I didn’t sell them, it was the captain, but he didn’t come with us, he stayed in Singapore to talk to another buyer, I had nothing to do with it —...” Dredov trailed off, looking at Percy.

Sentinel was silent for a long second. When he spoke, his voice was soft, almost gentle. “I thought I told you not to lie to me, Emmanuel.” He smoothly straightened up from where he was crouching, standing over the trafficker.

“I—I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

“It’s men like you,” Percy sighed, “That make me remember why I started all this.” He shook his head. “Get up.”

Dredov’s heart was beating a mile a minute, and he stumbled a few times as he got to his feet.

“Those kids are long dead, aren’t they?”

He received a mute nod. Percy nodded slowly himself, looking down. Around them, the winds picked up further, the seawater frothing.

With inhuman speed, Percy lunged forward and buried his blade hilt-deep into Dredov’s gut. One hand on the back of his neck, holding him upright, Percy leaned in. “You’ve outlived your usefulness, it seems.”

“You...you *promised*,” Dredov choked, blood spilling out from the seam of his lips.

“Someone told me, when I was a kid, that you should always get a solemn oath. Besides,” Percy replied lowly. “You were dead the second you told me what happened to the other six.”

He yanked his blade out, letting go and stepping back. Dredov swayed, fighting to stay upright, awake. Percy tapped his pointer on the hilt of his knife once, twice.

Then, he shrugged. “Don’t worry,” With a single powerful kick, Dredov went toppling over the edge of the dock, into the churning water below. “I hear cowards float.”

For a second, he slipped off his helmet, wiping a stray blood splatter off the side with the corner of his sleeve. Before putting it back on, he tilted his face up towards the dark sky. His face illuminated under the moonlight, Artemis, the *protector of children*, looking down upon him.

Percy spat on the docks.

Then, he waited there until the erratic heartbeat disappeared completely under the waves; a lone figure in the dark, hands in his pockets, breeze gently playing with his hair.

Chapter End Notes

all the human traffickers just. thinking percy was some random fucking merc that was hired to protect the shipment. same energy as endgame steve going 'hail hydra'

also p l e a s e leave me alone about the portuguese. i tried so hard guys. i really did. same with the snippet of russian, arabic, japanese, and spanish.

if it wasn't clear, i flip flopped inbetween people's names and their code names

yuh percy's bitterness to the gods
get it ig

and there will be a lot more bucky soon i pinky promise

Plumbing Baby. Goodbye.

Chapter Summary

Percy nodded absently, a deep furrow in his brow. “I really hope he has family looking for him.”

“Me too, Perce. Me too.”

Chapter Notes

about to wrap up lucas's arc! then bucky. i promise.

thanks to alex for beta reading <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Thursday, July 17

8:12 AM

Stark Tower, New York

The boy, whom Percy introduced as Lucas, hadn't detached from the demigod's side since they'd boarded the quinjet. Tony would have thought it was cute, if not for the circumstances.

Mrs. O'Leary was curled around the two of them, the young boy happily sandwiched between the two. He'd briefly woken up when Percy retrieved him from the captain's quarters, and he'd marched straight towards the jet.

Normally, he'd stay behind with SWORD to clean up the site. That was their job, after all.

(That was a whole other thing; Tony knew Percy too well to think he'd create a whole government support agency just because Fury asked him to. He knew the real reason; it had been torn out of a scratchy throat in the middle of a sleepless night. *“If we'd been there to clean up the site, Johnson and all her men would still be around today.”*)

But since the site itself was moveable this time, they just took the entire boat into custody. A Council rep had tried to take Lucas, as well. Tony was unsure who growled louder; Mrs. O'Leary, or Percy.

They'd taken him to medical, which he barely tolerated, gripping Percy's hand the entire time.

The ensuing report made Tony want to hit something. He was severely malnourished, and most definitely had an assortment of vitamin deficiencies, including a severe lack of Vitamin D. He had a collection of bruises and scrapes, including some bruised ribs. His wrist was sprained, and promptly put in a child-sized brace. One of his fingers had been broken, and then healed incorrectly. There were raw, red marks along his wrists and ankles from rope.

Most worrying of all, though, was the blood that stained his clothes.

Not all of it was his.

Thankfully, the kid had fallen asleep almost immediately after getting settled between the two. Tony kept a respectful distance; he'd have to be an idiot not to notice the distrustful way Lucas eyes him.

He seemed awfully content with Percy, though.

"I think it's been a while since he's been able to actually communicate with someone." Percy said softly, as not to wake him.

Tony looked up, squinting at Percy. Just because he found out about the whole *demigod* thing does not mean he dropped the *Nick Fury's School For Mindreaders* thing.

Percy's lips twitched slightly, but he quickly sobered. "He doesn't speak anything but Portuguese. I...I don't think he's been able to talk to anyone in a long time, Tony."

The engineer leaned back in his seat. "You think that's why he's so..."

"Attached? Yeah. I probably look a little more familiar to him, too. I doubt he's ever left Brazil.

Hasn't seen anyone that talks or looks like home since he got...taken."

And it was a cruel, cruel thing that *taken* was the better option of the two. If he was kidnapped, there was a chance of finding his family. If they sold him, well...

That was infinitely worse.

Percy rubbed a hand across his forehead. "What do you think is going to happen to him?"

Tony sighed. "Honestly? I'm not sure. All the kids we rescued from Ontario—" Percy flinched minutely. Tony bit his lip, but didn't comment. "—spoke English. A lot of them had families here, too, that had been looking for them. It's gonna be hard to find someone here that's alright with dealing with an enhanced kid in the first place."

Percy nodded absently, a deep furrow in his brow. "I really hope he has family looking for him."

"Me too, Perce. Me too."

Thursday, July 17

3: 23 PM

The Hub, NY

They made a brief stop at the Tower. Lucas had been gently coaxed into taking a shower, scraping off the layer upon layers of grime. Tony had called the nearest department store and offered an obscene amount of money if they delivered to the tower in under half an hour.

Once the boy had stepped out in clean, fresh clothes, it settled in just how thin he was.

Lucas stayed with Percy even as he went to HQ. The boy was silent, staring wide-eyed at everything and everyone. His hand was wrapped around a single one of Percy's fingers as they walked into one of the main conference rooms.

Hanover was waiting for him, leaning back in her chair.

Her eyes immediately flitted to the kid attached to his leg, but Percy offered no explanation. He just hefted Lucas up and the kid automatically wrapped himself around his torso like a koala. Keeping a neutral face, Percy sat down, keeping his posture perfectly straight. She stared. Percy remained unflinchingly silent.

Reyna would have been proud.

“Commander,” She eventually greeted.

“Councilwoman.”

She stared for a minute longer. “Was the mission a success?” She ventured.

Percy hummed. “I’d say so. Colonel Rhodes and Dr. Stark had no problems taking care of all the operatives on board. I slipped in undetected as well, and found the holding cells fairly quick.”

“Mm. Good.”

Once they’d gotten pleasantries out of the way, they could move to what she was really here to discuss. “And Emmanuel Dredov?”

“Is no longer a problem.” He said smoothly.

“Ah. You made the call?”

“I did.”

“And your team?”

“None the wiser,” Percy replied, lips pursed. He’d made it no secret he disapproved of the lack of SWORD’s involvement as a unit in the operation.

She nodded shortly, then stood. As always, she smoothed out nonexistent wrinkles from her pants. She was only a few steps from the doorway when she paused. “...Is he yours?”

Percy blinked “Excuse me?”

She just nodded at the half-asleep boy around his torso. “I assumed you would not be taking in random children to a highly confidential meeting.”

“No, Councilwoman. He’s not mine. Also, he can’t speak English, so no worries about the six-year-old selling state secrets.”

“You’re a shithhead, Jackson.” She said flatly. Percy’s lips twitched upwards. “Who is he?”

Percy rested a hand on Lucas’s back, any traces of a smile suddenly gone. “He was the only one left.”

The announcement made Hanover close her eyes, take in a slow breath, and squeeze one hand into a fist. “He seems... attached.”

She received a shrug. “You know, that’s what Tony said, too. He hasn’t wanted to leave my side. It’s not like we have anywhere else for him, though.”

It took her a second to place *Tony* with *Dr. Stark, Iron Man*, but she nodded. “We’ll find somewhere. Somewhere good.”

“We’ll have to.” He said solemnly. Hanover looked at him for a second longer before sweeping out of the room, heels clicking down the hallway as she left.

(On his way out, he was accosted by all six of his team members. “Where were you?” Ross

demanded.

“We have something *important* .” Bridgette added in a less pushy tone.

“I’ll be back first thing tomorrow. I have something to deal with. Can it wait?”

Bridgette lowered her shoulders in what seemed to be relief. “Yeah. It can wait.”

“Where did you go, though?” Dan spoke up.

Percy, who had completed two transatlantic journeys and had helped take down a small army, and hadn’t slept since, just blinked. “Bathroom.”

“...It’s been over 40 hours.”

“Bathroom.”

“You have a child,” Bridgette commented, giving Lucas an experimental poke. Lucas just mumbled something and returned to his nap.

“Plumbing baby. Goodbye.”)

Thursday, July 17

6:42 PM

Stark Tower, NY

Percy was completely unashamed to say the first thing he did upon getting back to the tower was go straight to his apartment.

FRIDAY turned on the lights in his living room, and Tony had printed out some coloring sheets. Peter had pulled out some crayons that, for some reason, he kept on him 24/7, and had left them there as well.

He settled the kid on the couch, spread out the color and paper options in front of him, pat Mrs. O'Leary on the head, went to his room, and fell face first asleep in his bed. Between the AI and hellhound, he knew Lucas was in good hands.

His nap was restful, for the most part.

"Please,"

It was cold. Windy, too. It nipped at his bare arms, his nose, his ears. It was sort of nice, though. It left his skin chilled and numb. He drifted with the feeling, closing his eyes as the breeze whistled by.

*"Don't... **please.**"*

Maybe it was snowing. The voice, begging and pleading, faded into the back of his mind as he stuck a hand out, palm cupped up towards the sky. A few stray flakes settled onto his skin, melting immediately upon contact.

He hummed, shaking the drops off. Percy bent down, scooping another handful off the frozen concrete. Snow was always one of his favorite things. When he was a kid, every first snow of the year, his mom would take him out, away from their little apartment by the Hudson, to Bryant Park. They'd build a snowman, together. As he got older, they got neater, less crooked.

He'd missed one year; he'd disappeared in September when he was 17, right before junior year, and didn't return until August, almost 12 months later. Ever since, he'd been extremely careful to have work off everytime snow graced the streets for the first time of the season. Now, it was him, his mom, Paul, and Estelle—usually plus whatever random cousin of Percy's that was with him. Once the snowman building was over, Paul and his mom would always go to the nearest cafe and get them all hot chocolate.

In the meantime, Percy and Estelle would have the snowball fight of the century. Every time she hit him, Percy would dramatically cry out and topple to the ground, begging for mercy.

He'd missed again, last year. He'd been unconscious in the med ward of the Tower. Apparently, he'd missed the first snow by just a week.

Estelle, Paul, and his mom had foregone the usual tradition and instead came to visit him. The adults brought hot chocolate, and Estelle brought a handful of snow. "Maybe if he touches it, he'll wake up!" She'd insisted.

He didn't.

With a jerk, Percy was pulled out of his reminiscing by something warm hitting the snow.

Blood. So hot it steamed against the frozen ground. Two sets of breathing. One ragged, kneeling, choking on blood. The other silent, standing over the person.

"You don't need to do this," The kneeling person croaked, cut off by another series of deeply concerning coughs.

There was no reply.

It took Percy to match that pained, choked voice to his own.

Like always, he woke with a jolt.

Percy rolled over with a groan, rubbing his eyes with the heel of his palm. "Fri?" He grunted.

"A whole hour and a half, Commander Jackson." She said encouragingly. "Better than usual."

"Right," He murmured, swinging his legs over the side of his bed. "Thanks. Lucas?"

"Still working on his masterpiece, it seems."

That brought a short smile to Percy's face. When he walked into his living room, he paused in the doorway. He wouldn't even try to deny it—Lucas reminded him of Estelle so much it hurt. All the times he walked into the living room of a different apartment, one much closer to the ground, to the people, where he could smell cigarette smoke from the alley outside and hear voices out on the sidewalk, to find his little sister diligently coloring in a *Little Mermaid* coloring book.

She'd always grab his hand and shove the page in it once she was done. "Feel the crayon!" She'd demand. He'd run his thumb over the waxy surface, and give her a smile. "That might just be the best art piece I've ever had the honor of touching." He'd say solemnly. Estelle would shriek happily, attach herself to his side, and do her best to describe the picture.

He wondered if Lucas ever did something like that. The kid had barely said a single word unprompted—even then, he'd only speak to Percy and Percy alone.

It was getting late, and Percy was still dead tired, but he still made a considerable amount of noise as he entered the living room, doing his best to not scare Lucas. The kid looked up at him, crayon still in hand.

Percy dropped down on the couch opposite. "*Hey, kid,*" He yawned through his words. "*Having fun?*"

Lucas gave a hesitant nod, fiddling with the edge of the paper. Percy gave him a soft smile. "*I'm glad. But, uh, I need to ask you some questions. Is that alright?*"

He received another nod, this one slower.

"*Cool. If you want me to stop, or if you need something, just tell me.*" Percy sighed, rolling the stiffness out of one shoulder. "*Do you have any family, Lucas?*"

He received no reply. Lucas furrowed his brow, looking intently down at the ground. Mrs. O'Leary gave the side of his face a gentle bop with her nose. He leaned back against the couch, drawing his knees up to his chest. "*Not anymore.*"

"*What's your last name? Do you remember?*"

"*Torres,*" Lucas whispered. "*It's Torres.*"

Silently signaling to FRIDAY to begin her search, he nodded. *“Do you know what today is?”*

Lucas shook his head.

“Alright. What’s the last date you remember?”

Lucas scrunched his nose. He rocked back and forth for a second before answering. *“We were getting ready for Páscoa. We were going to decorate eggs.”*

Fuck. That was months ago. Easter was on the 16th of April, this year. That meant Lucas had been gone for at least three months.

Percy closed his eyes, dropping his chin down to his chest. He let out a soft breath. *“Alright. Did someone you know give you to those men? The men on the boat?”* He asked gently.

Lucas shook his head adamantly. *“Then...did they take you?”*

Lucas’s shoulders tightened, and he blinked a few times in quick succession. Tears suddenly started gathering in the corners of his eyes, and Percy’s heart *broke*. The demigod stood up, walking around the coffee table, and gingerly sat down on the cushion next to him. He made sure to leave a bit of space between them, but Lucas almost immediately curled into his side. Percy rested a hand on his back.

“They grabbed me,” Came the soft sob. *“They came into our house—and, and they—”* He choked off. Percy immediately tightened his arm around him. Lucas shook his head, wiping furiously at his eyes. *“Mamãe was already gone. She’d been sick. It was just me and Sérgio,”*

Percy blinked at the new name. *“Sérgio ?”* He coaxed.

“My older brother.”

“You have an older brother?”

“I used to.”

Percy’s stomach lurched up into his throat. Lucas went on. *“They came in the house. They grabbed me and pulled me out. Sérgio was screaming, he was trying to stop them. I... I heard the gunshot before they put me in the van.”*

“Jesus Christ,” Percy whispered, horrified. He rubbed his thumb up and down Lucas’s arm. He waited a long few minutes before asking the next question.

“What happened after the van, Lucas?”

“A boat, I think. Then—then maybe a plane. They kept us somewhere on the ground for a while, then went to another boat. The...the man in the suit. He liked to move us.”

He took in a shallow breath. *“Us?”*

Lucas fiddled with his thumbs. *“There... there were five of us. Marya was strong. They would make her pick up pieces of stone and...and rubble. Muyang healed fast. They’d hurt him, sometimes. Just—just to see how much it worked. Ansh could make the wind. He was the smallest. And Ivan made things cold. He kept us from overheating, when we were in the boat. He was the last to...go.”*

Lucas looked up at him. *“Are they gone? Like Sérgio?”*

Percy swallowed, pressing his lips together. He nodded. *“Yeah. They are, and I’m so, so sorry.”*

“Will you find them? The men who took me? Who took them, too?”

“I...I’m going to try, Lucas. I’m going to try.” He said carefully. Percy learned not to make promises he wasn’t sure he could keep when he was fourteen. He’d be damned if he didn’t give it his all, though.

"You can do it," Lucas whispered. *"You're the Sentinel."* His voice was soft, almost reverent. Percy almost recoiled.

He probably meant it to be reassuring, but it just made Percy feel a little sick to his stomach.

Chapter End Notes

if you don't think peter keeps crayons on him 24/7, you are a fool.

hanover: where did you get this baby

percy:

hanover: jackson.

hanover: jackson where did you get this

hanover: jackson please

from now and forever, i will be signing off like this:

plumbing baby. goodbye.

-denimbeans

Phone Home

Chapter Summary

“I found somewhere he can go.”

Ina blinked. “Excuse me?”

“I found somewhere for Lucas.”

Chapter Notes

!!!! so a lot of you guys seemed pretty excited about a character playlist, so i went ahead and made a few. i have one for tony, bucky, and peter in the works. here's percy's now, though :)

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5sKSwyVzRWA718FPuswNcS?si=38e7a74ef2654b84>

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Friday, July 17

7:42 AM

Stark Tower, NY

Tony had taken to spending much more time in the labs, lately. And since where Tony went, Peter usually followed, they were sat opposite of each other at a work table, the original Star Wars trilogy quietly projected on a wall.

After enough pressure from MJ, Peter had finally begun his summer homework. At Tony's unimpressed eyebrow raise, he had just huffed, arms crossed. “It's not like it'll take me any longer than a week.”

A fair assessment, now that Tony saw him actually do it.

Gods, that kid was smart.

Tony looked back down to his own side of the table. Since he had finished Rhodey's braces and BARF, he'd been thinking about what would be next for his big projects.

The idea came in an Accords meeting, surprisingly. A brief mention of Lang—who was currently living out his house arrest sentence. According to his parole officer, Lang had been a model prisoner. He didn't do much; worked from home, spent time with his daughter, and had, apparently, begun to learn close-up magic.

He'd be out sometime in May next year, and was currently being considered for the new Avengers lineup. Something Tony was alright with—for all that had happened, he didn't particularly dislike Lang. Sure, when he turned giant and smacked Peter into the asphalt, he'd almost blown his head off, but Lang had since made amends. He'd actually sent a box of brightly frosted double-fudge brownies he and his daughter had made, with a note to *please give them to Spider-Man, tell him I am very sorry, and I think he's really cool.*

Peter had been positively ecstatic and started mumbling something about his *fellow bug*.

Tony didn't ask.

The rest of the meeting was with Hope Van Dyne; another person Tony didn't mind. They'd actually known each other, albeit tentatively, since they were young. Competing companies, and all that.

Her relationship with Lang was something Tony left untouched, despite his curiosity. Overtime, the ice in her eyes had thawed whenever she mentioned him, so Tony figured it would all work out.

But the thing that really got him thinking was how Lang had gotten into his suit. Now that he'd seen it happen, he couldn't ignore it. It was a glaringly obvious weakness. But how to get around it, was the real question.

The scratching of Peter's pencil momentarily paused. "Hey, Mr. Stark, does this look right?"

Tony looked up from the scraps in front of him and craned his neck to see the paper. Peter silently

turned it around so he could see better.

“Yeah, kid. Looks great. Perfect, actually.” Tony grinned. “How long did it take you?”

“Eh. A few minutes.”

Tony snorted softly, turning the page back around. “I expect nothing less,” He teased.

Peter’s ears turned pink. Behind them, Leia frees Han Solo from the carbonite.

“Hey, nerds!” Percy’s loud voice rang out from the hallway. Giving each other startlingly identical eye rolls, Tony and Peter both turn to face the doorway.

When Percy pokes his head in, Mrs. O’Leary hangs back a few feet behind him. Lucas is seated upon her back, arms lightly gripping her sides. He looks incredibly content, face mashed into her fur. “We have a meeting in twenty.”

As they pack up their things, Peter squints at Percy. “We’re not *nerds*.”

“Yeah? What’s 8453 divided by 353?”

“‘Bout 23.94, why?” Peter said automatically.

Percy just quirks a brow at him.

Peter scowled. Tony hid a laugh behind his hand.

As they went up to the elevator, Peter turned to Percy. “Were you a nerd? I still remember when you talked with Ned’s mom about seagulls for half an hour after you got us suspension ice cream. Nobody should know that much about birds, of any kind.”

"I'm sorry, he got you *what*?" Tony said, giving Percy a wide-eyed look. The demigod ignored him. "I like sea fowl." He said flatly. "I was most certainly not a nerd."

Tony tilted his head, resolving to interrogate him about the *suspension ice cream* later. "Were you a jock?" He wrinkled his nose. "You kind of look like you'd shove a kid in a locker. No offense."

Percy shrugged. "Oh, I did. Out of revenge, though. More than once." He scratched the back of his neck. "I was actually more of a loner, than anything. Kids didn't like me much. Got bullied a lot." He admitted.

"Wait, *you*?"

"I was twelve, Peter. Yeah, I got a lot of shit. I was five-foot-nothing, couldn't sit still for more than two minutes or read a cohesive sentence aloud. I was friends with the weird kids, all my clothes were secondhand, and had a temper. People didn't like me very much. Thought I was a lot more trouble than I was worth." He said it offhandedly, but Tony and Peter exchanged worried looks nonetheless.

Before either of them could bring up the subject again, the elevator doors opened, and Percy strode out.

The conference room was already occupied when they walked in. A woman and a man, both dressed in nice suits, sitting next to each other at the opposite end of the table. They remained impassive when Tony came in, but looked a tad confused when Peter followed. When Mrs. O'Leary and Lucas followed Percy, their mouths were slightly agape.

The woman recovered first. She stood, offering a hand to shake. "Ina Porter. I'm with CPS. This is my colleague, Joseph Adams." Tony shook her hand. "A pleasure."

She gave him a short smile. "Likewise. I wish it were under better circumstances." She sat back down and pulled a manilla folder from her briefcase.

From her left, Adams spoke up. "We were told there was going to be a Council representative here...?" He trailed off into a question.

Percy stepped forward. "That'd be me. Commander Jackson." And just like that, the man who was

smiling and teasing them in the elevator was gone. His words were clipped, tone flat. Gods, Tony hated it when he did that. How *Percy* seemed to be a completely different person from *Commander Jackson*.

Adams gave a short nod. Then, he looked questioningly over at Peter.

Tony just gave him a grand smile and clapped Peter on the shoulder. “Intern. Has clearance, don’t worry about it. He’s here for the learning experience.” Tony said, waggling his fingers at the last two words.

The man blinked at him a couple times. “Intern?” He repeated.

The engineer shrugged at him. “Someone’s gotta learn to take care of this stuff once I get bored.” He said carelessly, breezing past the others to take a seat at the table. Percy had the stoic, cold commander to play, but Tony had the careless, irresponsible billionaire.

Peter choked violently. Percy gave him a short pat on the back.

Ina just sighed. “Right.” She craned her neck, peering around Percy. “And is this Lucas?” She said, pitching her voice soft. With a snap of his fingers, Mrs. O’Leary, and the parasite attached to her back, heeled. “Yes.” He said shortly.

She offered him a gentle smile, but Lucas just hid further into Mrs. O’Leary. Percy put a light hand on the boy’s back, and Lucas relaxed a little. Ina’s brow raised slightly, clearly not missing it.

Adams reached over and took the file, opening it and sliding it towards Tony. Peter slowly drifted towards him, having recovered from the shock, and sat next to him. Percy, on the other hand, stayed where he was, slightly unnerving the two CPS agents.

“This,” Ina said, lips pursed, “Is all we have, placement wise.”

Tony blinked. “There’s almost nothing here.” He whispered.

Ina lowered her head and nodded. “It’s...It’s been bad. With how things have been recently,

nobody wants to take in an Enhanced kid. Finding placements is next to impossible. For security reasons, he needs to stay in the country. So, especially one that speaks Portuguese? It's not going to happen."

Tony rubbed a hand across his face. "*Nobody* ?"

Fists clenching under the table, Adams nodded. "Most people these days who offer to take in Enhanced kids...well, their intentions don't make it past the first background check."

Peter looked horrified. "What do you mean?"

From his spot by the wall, Percy grit out, "They offer to foster the kids, and then they either sell or kill them."

Ina nodded. "Yes." She admitted. "We're trying our best, but..." She sighed again. Tony felt a bolt of pity run through him. She looked truly, deeply tired. But underneath that, there was a bright undercurrent of anger. "You said there was nobody left of his family?"

"We checked. Dad was never in the picture, mom died two years ago. He had an older brother but —" Tony swallowed. "He was killed the same night Lucas got taken. And not a single missing report was filed, afterwards."

"They have *nobody* ." Peter's whisper was soft, but it didn't need to be loud. A heavy weight settled over the room. Tony leaned his head back, staring at the overhead lights, blinking furiously.

Everyone jumped when they heard the crack. Tony's eyes went wide, his brows going low, when he looked at Percy.

Percy, who was clenching his fist so hard his knuckles just popped. "I..." He breathed, biting firmly on the inside of his cheeks, "I'll be right back."

He turned and swept out of the room, white knuckling his phone.

After a beat, Peter quietly stood up and took a seat on the floor against the wall with Lucas and Mrs. O’Leary, who had both taken a liking to him.

Tony watched them for a second, Peter smiling at Lucas, still managing a bright face despite everything. The “dog” settles down against Peter’s leg, and Lucas slides off her back. Peter pulls a loose piece of notebook paper from his pants pocket and two crayons, one bright red and the other a nice green, from his shirt pocket.

Unable to help the fond smile settling across his face, Tony resisted the urge to ask FRIDAY to take a photo. Honesty, she might have done it on her own anyways. Pepper had been the one to mention it to him, because of course Tony didn’t know that his own AI had been compiling photos for both blackmail and cute scrapbooking.

Percy, as per usual, was the one to inspire such chaos. Apparently, he talked to the AI a considerable amount. When FRIDAY one day lamented on the boredom due to her unused server power, Percy recommended scrapbooking. “My mom does it,” He’d explained. “So do two of my cousins. I think you’d enjoy it.”

The blackmail photos were just a favor. Every few days, Percy and FRIDAY would go over them and she would do her best to describe the scene. And her best was very, excruciatingly good. It’s no wonder Percy had seemed suspiciously omnipotent lately.

Listen, Tony was glad that his AI had taken it as a personal quest to make everything accessible for Percy. But verbally painting the picture of what Tony looked like when he accidentally took a sip of motor oil instead of coffee and had to take a short trip down to the medbay, was a little much.

(No it wasn’t. Tony would never admit it, though.)

Back on the floor, Peter and Lucas began a game of tic-tac-toe. They didn’t exchange words, instead using vague gestures and laughing when they won. It was...sweet.

Yeah, *sweet*.

God, he was getting soft.

When Percy came back in, the doors opened with a bang. Or, they would have, if his hand hadn’t

shot out and grabbed them before they hit the wall. Peter shot him a grateful look.

The demigod strode straight to the table and turned towards the two agents.

Tony could almost see the moment when it happened. When Percy turned in their general direction, they both looked at the exact same spot on his face. Like they were just making eye contact.

He couldn't even notice it was happening, at first. When Percy used what he called the Mist. But he was getting better at it, now. Percy assured him he'd one day be able to detect it from a mile away. He'd been worried; extremely so. He knew how Tony felt about mind control, of any kind.

And it had bothered him, just a little, at first. But then he really paid attention to why Percy was doing it. And, well, he really couldn't blame the guy for protecting himself and his secrets.

"I found somewhere he can go."

Ina blinked. "Excuse me?"

"I found somewhere for Lucas. Two parents, they already have one kid, about his age. Mom and daughter speak fluent Portuguese, and the dad is pretty damn good. One's an ELA teacher, the other a writer, so they'll have no problem teaching him English as well. They live in Manhattan, so we can frequently check in. They're both registered foster parents, and passed all the background checks. And they're more than okay with taking in an Enhanced kid."

The two agents looked positively stunned. "You—what?" Adams fumbled.

Percy didn't waver. "I just had the file sent to you. If you want to do a visit of your own, give them a call."

Ina took in a few breaths, rubbing her temple. Then, she looked up at him. "Commander," she started. "I won't lie, this is... out of nowhere. We'll do a welfare check first, of course, but...this option is probably our only one." Her face was intense. "Do you think these people can take care of that boy? He trusts you more than anyone here."

“Personally, I can’t think of a single person better to take him in.”

She held his gaze for a second longer, then nodded. “We’ll look into it, and get back to go by the end of today.”

The agents stood, gathered their stuff, and hustled out of the conference room.

He waited until their footsteps long since faded before speaking. Tony swiveled towards the demigod in his chair. “Care to explain?”

Percy shrugged, his shoulders tight. “I found someone.” He said plainly.

Tony hoped his face conveyed just how unimpressed he was. Peter was the one to break first, though, and ask, “Who?”

“Sally and Paul Blofis.”

“...You called your mom?” Tony said, slightly incredulous.

“Hell yeah, I did.”

Friday, July 17

3:52 PM

Ingram St., NY

It took Peter a moment to realize where they were going, peering out of the car window. “Hey, wait! I live near here!”

They'd passed Delmar's almost a second ago, and now were following his usual route home. Percy smiled slightly, but said nothing.

From the front seat, Mr. Stark snorted. "Your perceptiveness worries me, kid."

Peter crossed his arms and pouted in the back seat. Mr. Stark caught his eye and smiled at him in the rear view mirror, which lessened his slouch.

Mr. Stark and Percy were in the front, and Peter, Lucas, and Mrs. O'Leary occupied the back. The kid had reluctantly been separated from Percy, once he saw him get in the front. He didn't mind Peter, though, which Peter took as a personal win.

"Left," Percy ordered, fiddling idly with the radio knob. Tony smacked his hand away, but still turned.

As they pulled up, Peter made a soft noise in the back of his throat. Once again, Percy didn't respond. He just got out of the car and walked to the back, opposite of Peter's side. Mrs. O'Leary opened the door (...okay) and hopped out. Lucas wiggled his way out of the middle seat and Percy scooped him up.

Peter just blinked a couple times and then unbuckled his own seatbelt, sliding out of the car. "Uhm, Mr. Stark?"

The engineer looked over at him, pushing his sunglasses up on his nose. "What's up, kid?" He asked as they began to ascend the front steps. They stopped at the front buzzer, where a dozen key slots sat against the wall.

"Why are we at my building?"

Percy just pulled a worn key out of his pocket, unlocked one of the tiny compartments, and pressed the button inside. The front swung open.

"And why does Percy have a key?"

They walked inside, heading straight for the staircase. Mr. Stark shrugged. “I’m pretty sure at this point, Percy has keys to everything, physical and non.”

They went all the way up the sixth floor. You know, where Peter lived.

“That’s terrifying.”

“Yup.”

Still leading the charge, Percy walked right past Peter’s own front door, to the one painted a delightful blue next to it. Ms. Sally’s door. He pocketed his keys, instead just knocking. The door opened, a nice looking woman in her forties standing in the threshold.

Her skin was a warm brown, her eyes the color of melted chocolate. Her hair was dark and curly, streaks of gray running through it. Her face was creased with smile lines and crows feet, and she was dotted with faint freckles.

Ms. Sally’s eyes lit up upon seeing them.

She smiled, dimples flashing. “ *Percy* , there you are,” She rested both her hands on his shoulders, giving him a onceover. “Have you been sleeping?”

Percy sighed, but he was grinning. ““Ae, makuahine.” She tutted nonetheless, and ushered them all inside.

Brow slightly furrowed, Peter stepped over the threshold. Ned had a few Hawaiian family members, and he could have sworn he remembered that phrase being said around him once. Down to the very same exasperated tone, too.

But what did it *mean*?

Peter hadn’t been to his neighbors in a while—but it looked just like he remembered. It had that

warm, friendly feel that reminded Peter of his own home. Plants bloomed in every corner, and dark oak bookshelves reached up to the ceiling. Fuzzy throw blankets dotted the gray couches, along with a few spare papers and an open laptop.

A couple dozen souvenirs and tchotchkes dotted any open shelf and mantle space—they seemed to be from all over, Chile to Mongolia. Oddly enough, though, he didn't see any vacation photos. There were a few relatively small ones on the mantle, though. He wanted to wander a little closer, but he turned to Ms. Sally, first.

“Nice to see you again, ma’am.”

She gave him a smile that looked oddly familiar, in a way it didn't the last time he saw her. “You as well, Peter.” She lightly clapped her hands together. “And who,” She moved towards Lucas. “Is this?”

She crouched down in front of the boy, who was hiding behind Percy's leg. His eyes darted up to her, for just a second, and his eyes widened. He looked between Ms. Sally and Percy for a second, then his face lit up. Percy just grinned.

Ms. Sally, still crouched down, started speaking to him gently in another language. Lucas responded with a tentative type of enthusiasm, still gripped onto Percy's leg.

For a second, the woman looked over at Tony and Peter. “It's quite warm out, isn't it? There's cookies and lemonade for both of you on the counter. Feel free.” She smiled at them again, then turned back to Lucas.

Peter normally would politely refuse, but...he could smell the cookies from his spot near the door, alright? He was a weak, weak man.

He slipped off his shoes to go further into the house and wandered towards the kitchen. On the way, though, he slowed down by the fireplace. On top of it, there were a couple mismatched photo frames.

In the first, there was a picture of what looked like a young Ms. Sally, standing on a beach, holding a bundle of blankets in her arms. Her eyes shone, smiling down at the baby.

Then, she's holding what looks like a toddler. They're both gripping ice cream cones, and he's sticking his little tongue out at the camera.

In another, there was a young boy, probably around seven or eight. His hair was dark and untamed, his skin tanned, and he was grinning at the camera. He was missing a couple teeth, emphasizing his youth.

Peter's brow creased a little. He remembered, when he was much, much younger, going over to the Blofis apartment. They used to watch him, sometimes. He knew they'd had a son—Peter was fairly sure he'd met him. But when Peter was around seven, maybe, he'd simply...disappeared. Aunt May said he'd joined the military, and that he was just overseas. According to her, he'd visited a couple times—always late in the day, and they'd run into each other when she was coming home from work.

But the visits stopped. Peter didn't notice at first, but May did.

"There aren't any recent photos of him." She'd said softly, sitting across the table from Peter. "She has these lined up photos on the wall in the back, one from every birthday. There wasn't one this year."

Peter looked back at the pictures on the mantle.

Next to the one he'd looked at before, the same boy. He looked around twelve, now, and was accompanied by two other people. A shy looking guy wearing a rasta cap, and an exasperated looking blonde girl. They were on either side of the boy, and he had an arm looped around each of their shoulders, pulling them in close. The girl was rolling her eyes, but her smile was poorly hidden.

The boy's hand was wrapped in bandages, and the girl had a long scrape up the side of her face.

After that, there was one of the same boy. This time, though, he was sitting at the dining table, a slice of blue cake in front of him. Next to him, a pale boy wearing an aviators jacket sat. In the corner, the discarded candles, proudly proclaiming the number 15, lay. Despite the occasion, there was a sort of tension, of deep, weary sadness in the boy's eyes.

He's wearing a simple tee, and Peter's keen eyes pick out a small pattern of scars on his upper arm.

In all the next photos, he's wearing long sleeves.

There's one of him and that same girl. She's clinging onto his back, arms wrapped around his chest. They're laughing, and not even looking at the camera. Just each other.

But Peter can clearly see his face now, along with the bright gray streak that runs through both their hair. It's Percy Jackson in that photo, young and looking incredibly *alive*. His teeth are a little crooked, he's a couple inches shorter, and he's still lanky in the way Peter knows all kids his own age are, but it's definitely him.

Peter sneaks a look up at the real person. While yes, this Percy is smiling, too, it's different. He's older, obviously; broader shoulders, a more defined jaw. But the look in his eyes is older of a completely different kind. Maybe it's the scars around his eyes, up his jaw, around his neck and his wrists and the little scraps of torso Peter has seen, but this Percy Jackson just seems so much older than the one in the photo.

A brief break with photos of just him; there's a picture of Ms. Sally and her husband on the altar. They're dressed fairly casual for a wedding, but still formal. She's holding a bouquet of flowers, and he's looking at her like she's the best thing he's ever seen.

Then, and this one is dated on December 5th of 2010, it's Ms. Sally in a delivery room. She's holding a newborn to her chest. She looks incredibly tired, but there's a warm glow to her face. There's a few more of the girl as she grows—she looks quite a bit like her mother.

Then, the last one. So far, they have been spaced out every few years, or so. By his estimate, Percy was barely sixteen in the last one. But the next one Peter picks up, he has to be at least twenty.

This photo is different.

Percy is there, yes, but there's no trace of mirth on his face. He's standing on what looks like a field, wearing some sort of armor. And not the type Peter has seen him in—no, this looks like actual *armor*. It's a mix of leather and a dark bronze, and it should look odd, like something out of a historical reenactment, but there's a blood red cape over one shoulder and the armor is dented and scratched and it looks anything but unused.

His sword is on his hip, a knife on his thigh, and a spear in his hand. His spine is perfectly straight, and Mrs. O'Leary is standing next to him. They're both speckled with blood.

Under the arm not holding a spear, there's a helmet. It's made of the same stuff as his armor, with a plume as red as his cape.

Peter holds the frame a bit closer to his face. In the corner, written neatly in sharpie, there's a note.

He misses you.

Take care.

-Reyna

It's a long minute of staring before Peter quietly puts the photo down and escapes to the kitchen.

Lucas and Sally get along wonderfully. It's only been a few minutes, but he seems pretty damn attached to her. Tony can't help the soft smile that creeps up on his face as Lucas lets her pick him up. She coos over him, pinching his cheeks and smoothing out a wrinkle on his collar.

Peter comes out of the kitchen a few minutes later, holding a small stack of blue cookies, staring at the ground. He drifts over to Tony's side, eventually, and the engineer gives him a worried look. Peter just shakes his head, so Tony just puts a hand on his shoulder instead.

Eventually, Percy checks his watch and deflates a little. Ms. Sally looks up. "Time to go?"

He nodded regretfully. She holds out an arm, and Percy doesn't hesitate to go in for a hug. He's about half a foot taller than her, but she still kisses him on the forehead. "I've missed you," She murmurs. He returns the sentiment. Percy says something quietly to Lucas, next. It sounds like a promise.

Peter and Tony are already halfway out the door when Ms. Sally catches Percy's wrist. If Tony could speak Hawaiian, he'd hear this;

“Have you heard from your father recently?”

And Percy paused, then sighed, because it’s been *months* . *“No. Not since I woke up.”*

Ms. Sally clenched her jaw, but nodded a little. Then she gave the group her best smile and, together, her and Lucas wave. Before he shuts the door, Percy calls out, “Bye, mom!”

Cue Peter choking on his spit. *“MOM?”*

The ride back was overcrowded with Peter’s incredulous voice and Percy’s dry responses.

“Yes, Peter. My mother. I didn’t just spawn, you know.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” Tony muttered as he flipped on his blinker.

Percy reached out and punched him in the arm without missing a beat. Tony stuck his tongue out at him.

“B—but, she’s my neighbor!”

“Yes, Peter. Last I checked, there were pictures of me all over the house. How did you not figure this out earlier?”

“I—I don’t go over a lot! When I do, I’m usually doing something, not looking at photos!”

Percy snorted. “Right,”

In the backseat, Peter huffed. “Aunt May thought her son joined the military!”

“Oh, I did.”

Tony interjected, here. “Excuse me?”

Grinning a little too wide, Percy supplied, “Just not the American one.”

“Percy,” Peter says, sounding a little horrified, “I’m pretty sure the whole building thought you went to war and *died*.”

The demigod lets out a soft breath, all traces of mirth suddenly gone. “Yeah,” He murmured. “Yeah, I know.”

“*Why?*”

Tony takes a hand off the steering wheel to put a gentle hand on Percy’s shoulder. The demigod rubs a thumb between his eyes. “The SHIELD file dump. I pissed a lot of people off, and it made me suddenly a very easy target. We erased all legal connections between me and my family. My mom removed the *Jackson* part off of her last name. We couldn’t make the whole building just forget about me, though. So...” He shrugged. “They assumed I’d joined the military, not SHIELD or the HSRD. So we just had to...let them assume.”

“That’s...that’s awful. I’m sorry, Percy.”

He just received a shrug.

The car became completely silent, save for the steady clicking of the blinker.

Then, suddenly, Peter made a choking noise. “Wait,” He said slowly, sounding frankly horrified. “You *babysat me?*” He demanded.

Instantly easing the tension laying across them, Tony let out a loud bark of laughter. Percy flashed a shark's grin over his shoulder.

"Oh, yeah. We moved here when I was thirteen, and you and your Aunt came a few years later. I mean, we only did it a couple times."

Peter blinked a couple times. The file dump happened when Peter was thirteen, but his last memories of being babysat in the Blofis apartment were *way* before that. "Wait, when did you stop?"

Cocking his head, Percy hummed. "Summer before my Junior year. You would've been about... seven, I suppose?"

It was quiet for a long minute. "Oh." Peter whispered softly. Then, "Why?"

Percy's lips turned downwards. "Are you alright, Peter?"

The boy's breathing had sped up a little. "Y—yeah. I'm...Just, why?"

He didn't answer for a second, biting the inside of his cheek. Tony dared to look away from the road for a second to the passenger seat. Percy's dark brow was furrowed, and there was a strange look on his face. Finally, he said, "I went missing."

Tony's brows shot up. Peter made a soft noise in the backseat, but said nothing further. He just curled up against the door, staring out the car window.

Chapter End Notes

scott lang <3

nobody:

tony stark: LOOK AT MY SON GO

also, i am aware tony confirmed that it was percy's mom while in the conference room with peter. my boy pete was just too focused on the crayons to hear him.

also p l e a s e excuse my attempt at hawaiian. i tried so hard guys. feel free to correct

me. i beg of you.

timeline rundown-

after being a girlboss and killing gabe, sally and percy move to a new apartment building. a few years later, peter, ben, and may move next door.

percy, sally, and eventually paul all occasionally babysat peter. (who's almost exactly ten years younger than percy)

they stopped, however, when percy went missing. they both spent most of their time looking for him, and were in no state to babysit peter.

percy returns home, and turns 18 a bit later. but now they're dealing with a recently blinded and severely traumatised teenager, so they don't interact with the neighbors much.

percy moves out, and estelle is born. so once again, sally and paul are incredibly busy. while in the HSRD and SHIELD, percy visits his mom, paul, and estelle every now and then. usually fairly late in the day, hence why peter never sees him. aunt may assumes he's in the military.

the file dump happens, and percy has to dissapear. legally, he doesn't exist, but people in his building still remember him. and since he isn't able to come home anymore, at least for a long while, people kind of...assume he died. and they just go with it.

he spends a couple months in new rome, where that last photo on the mantle is from.

peter: we thought you went to war and DIED

percy, who technically did go to war and die:

and in case you missed it at the top, character playlist for my version of percy :)

[https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5sKSwyVzRWA718FPuswNcS?
si=38e7a74ef2654b84](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5sKSwyVzRWA718FPuswNcS?si=38e7a74ef2654b84)

plumbing baby. goodbye.

You Got A Problem With Triangles?

Chapter Summary

“I was looking through another one of those file stacks, and I found something. It was just an old expense report, but it mentioned something.”

He swallows.

“Have you ever heard of an Project Integrity?

Chapter Notes

it's forced proximity time, lads

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Friday, July 18

10:02 AM

The Hub, NY

When Percy walks through the front entrance, Bridgette is waiting for him. She’s clutching a tablet, rocking back and forth on her heels.

Percy blinks. “Are you alright?”

She gives a loose shrug. “We found something.” She settles on.

He gestures for her to lead the way.

Together, they walk to Dan’s computer room, where the rest of the team waits. Percy leans against one of the tables.

Ross speaks first. “I was looking through another one of those file stacks, and I found something. It was just an old expense report, but it mentioned something.” He swallows. “Have you ever heard

of a *Project Integrity*?

Percy opens his mouth, then closes it. His brow furrows. He pushes himself off the desk, standing upright. “No,” He says. “No, I haven’t.”

Lee makes a frustrated noise. “Great, because we can’t find a *single* thing about it.”

“And there’s no chance it was abandoned, or ended.” Dan pipes in, eyes glued to his computer screen. “There’s a database of all old projects. It’s not on there.” He slowly swivels to face them. “And with the clearance we’ve got? Trust me, *everything* is on there.”

Still frowning heavily, Percy checks his watch. “I’ll look into it.” He starts towards the door, and Aspen frowns a little behind him. “You just got here.” They point out.

Percy runs a hand through his hair. “Yeah, I know. I have... a prior engagement.”

As he walks down the hallway, he catches a single bit of conversation.

“That’s not at all suspicious.” Ross murmurs. “I really hope it has to do with Thor.”

“For fucks sake, shut *up* about Thor.” Mal hisses.

Friday, July 18

10:21 AM

Stark Tower, NY

Bucky’s been sitting in the lab for almost twenty minutes when the trio finally comes in.

It’s a different lab than the last time. This one is practically empty—no blueprints or notes, spare parts or half finished projects. There’s a metal table in the middle, though, and FRIDAY instructed

him to sit on it in the meantime.

His heart rate is fluttery, and he's trying his best not to jog his leg.

Stark and Jackson come in, step in step, but not speaking to each other. Behind them, Shuri trails. When she sees him, over Jackson's shoulder, she smiles widely and waves. Bucky automatically smiles back.

Bucky and Stark make eye contact, just for a second, and they both instantly look away.

Shuri bounces right over to him, giving him a tight hug as soon as she's in range. "Hey, Sergeant!" As lightly as he can, he returns the embrace. "Shuri,"

Like always, Jackson hangs back against a wall, looking completely relaxed, but still making the hair on the back of Bucky's neck stick up.

"Alright," Stark murmurs. "Here we go." He steps into Bucky's eyeline, looking down at the thing in his hands. It's a tablet—sleek, thin, and probably built to withstand a bullet. Shuri releases him after a second, letting Stark take her spot. He places it on the table next to Bucky, and then produces a bunch of small wires. Connected at the ends is a small white pad.

Bucky, to his surprise, actually recognizes them. EEG was a relatively new idea when he was a kid, and he had seen an exhibit or two on it at the World Fair he'd dragged Steve to. Even *he* had been too short to properly see the exhibits at the time, but it was still one of the best days he'd had that year.

Without being asked, he frees a hair tie from his wrist and pulls his hair back, off his temples and forehead. Stark gives him a strained attempt at a smile.

He carefully attached the electrodes, making a conscious effort not to touch Bucky's skin with his own. Bucky isn't sure if it's meant for him or Stark, but he appreciates it either way. One on each temple, two anchored a bit behind his hairline, and a simple band on his wrist measuring his pulse. As he does, Shuri rattles off just exactly what BARF does, what part of the brain it will access, potential side affects...

Stark takes a few steps back, and picks his tablet back up. He clears his throat, looking down at the

screen. “Okay,” He says, brow furrowed in concentration. “At any moment you want to pause or end the session, just tap twice on the table. Ending early won’t negatively affect anything.” He glances up at Bucky. “You ready?”

Bucky closes his eyes for a second and takes a deep breath. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m ready.” He’s been ready for a long, long time.

He receives a single nod, and Stark begins to count down.

When Bucky opens his eyes again, it’s just like Shuri told him it would be. Like he’s watching a memory of his own life, standing off to the side, a passive observer.

He knows this first part. It’s snowing, and he’s standing at the bottom of a frozen ravine, deep in the Austrian Alps. He knows it’s freezing cold and windy, but can’t feel a thing.

A few meters away, his own body lays in the snow, slowly turning white to red.

He hears them before he sees them; heavy, dragging footsteps. Bucky jerks around, eyes wide. The two Hydra operatives don’t see him—of course they don’t. Instead, they trudge through the snow, all the way to what was supposed to be his final resting place.

One of them leans over, looking at his past self’s body. “ *This...* ” The man mumbles in German. “ *This man looks familiar.* ” He reaches out with a gloved hand, and grips Bucky’s jaw, turning his unconscious face over.

Standing off to the side still, though he can’t feel the contact, Bucky shivers.

“*One of the Howling Commandos.*” His partner realizes. “*The sharpshooter. Captain America’s best friend.*”

The two exchange a look. And then they grab Bucky by the shoulders and start to drag him across the snow, leaving a scarlet trail, all the way down to his own personal Hell.

Next, he finds himself standing against a dark concrete wall. It looks like an operating room. There's a circle of people, pressed shoulder to shoulder, around a table. Bucky has no problem shouldering his way into their group. They don't even react to him—silently moving aside.

His past self is laying there, minus one arm, face pale and lips blue. His hair was still cropped short, just like he remembered it, before he fell. The scar he's had on his neck for *he's not sure how long* isn't there.

"They had to take his arm," The woman next to him murmurs to the man standing across from her. *"They want to make him a new one."*

Another person, staring intently at his unconscious face, hums. *"Do it."*

And with those words, Bucky is condemned.

They keep him in a cell for the first few weeks. He's still weak from blood loss, and still hasn't grasped the fact that he's missing a limb.

Bucky always thought they drugged him, during that time. Watching it happen is like a knife to the gut, but he supposed it's nice to have confirmation. To actually know for sure.

He's barely lucid. The few moments he is, he calls for people. Sometimes Steve, his sister or his mother, sometimes Peggy, or just for *anyone*.

Nobody comes. Bucky knows this already, but somehow it hurts worse to watch knowing the outcome.

They don't feed him regularly. To keep him from knowing how much time has passed. At this point, it's been weeks since he's seen the sun.

Nobody comes.

The next thing he sees, Bucky taps out.

Seeing that room, that *chair*, is enough to send his pulse rocketing. He isn't sure if Stark ends it before or after he roughly taps his knuckles on the smooth metal, but as soon as he's out, he lurches forward.

He feels like he's choking, gasping for air like he's being held underwater.

Stark and Shuri's voices, no matter how close, sound distant. Bucky heaves in, out, nails digging into his palm.

“—ey, Barnes. *Barnes.*”

Bucky finally looks up, still shaking like a leaf. Stark is leaning down, level with him, eyes wide. He looks concerned, of all things. Bucky mutely shakes his head. He doesn't deserve Stark's concern. Not after what he's done.

“I'm sorry,” Is all he can get out. “I'm so sorry.”

Stark breathes in sharply, lips parting slightly. He stares at Bucky for a long second before dropping his gaze. He opens his mouth, but then closes it.

Then, finally, “I know.” He looks back up, meeting his eyes. “I know. It wasn't your choice.”

It's not an *I forgive you*, but it might as well be. It's close enough. Bucky slumps forward like a puppet with its strings cut, chest heaving.

Shuri is next to him in an instant, lightly bumping their shoulders together in a silent show of support. She's smiling at him again. She almost looks proud.

They spend the remainder of the hour in silence. It's still incredibly awkward, but nowhere near as tense as it was beforehand. Stark pulls off the electrodes, and Bucky watches him scroll through the data. It doesn't mean much to him, but it's the kind of mindless activity he needs right now. Eventually, Shuri checks her watch, and sighs. "My plane leaves soon," She stands up, brushes off her pants, and holds out her fist.

Bucky rolls his eyes, but obliges, bumping her knuckles with his own. (Right hand. Never the left. *Never.*)

She gives a little laugh, like she always does after she gets a fist bump from the former Winter Soldier. Her and Stark talk in hushed voices for a few minutes—Bucky could listen in if he really wanted to, but his brain still feels a little fizzy, so he just closes his eyes and rubs his temple. He almost misses when she starts to pack up all her gear. She waves goodbye to him, albeit sadly. "I'm sorry I couldn't stay longer," She says softly. He just waves her off. "Thanks for coming."

Shuri walks out of the lab, down the hall, leaving Bucky alone with Stark.

Eventually, Stark stands up. "I, uh, board meeting." He gives him a short smile. Less strained. Bucky does his best to return it.

"You feeling alright?"

Bucky gives a vague shrug. "I feel like I've been punched in the gut, honestly."

Stark lets out a surprised laugh. His face lights up and his eyes crinkle. It's something Bucky never thought he'd see on the man's face. "Right," Stark says. "Maybe try taking a nap. You'll need to be supervised for the next couple hours, just in case."

Stark collects the wires, winding them into a neat coil. "Hey, babysitter!" He calls over his shoulder.

Jackson sighs and pushes himself off the wall. Stark gives him a wide grin. Jackson rolls his eyes.

Finished packing up, Stark turns back to Bucky. "Drink some water, eat lunch if you're hungry."

We don't expect any major side effects, but," He shrugs. "Just in case." As Jackson nears, he adds, "Oh, and I promise he isn't as mean as he looks. Well—" Stark cuts himself off and shrugs.

He walks out of the lab, tablet under his arm. Bucky stares helplessly as he walks away.

"Come on." Bucky jumps a little. Jackson is standing next to him, now, hands in his pockets.

Wordlessly, he stands up and follows him.

The elevator ride is silent as they go up to the top. Jackson doesn't even turn his way. Oddly, though, Bucky doesn't mind. He takes the unobstructed silence to collect himself, to get the tremor in his hands under control.

He's a little surprised when Jackson walks right past Bucky's own door, down the hall. He opens the door, but doesn't step inside, instead gesturing for Bucky to enter. After a second's hesitation, he does.

It looks a lot like his. The same layout, same countertops and cabinets, couches and coffee table. But, unlike his, Jackson's looks like somebody actually lives in it.

There are books on the table, plants in the windows, a crocheted throw blanket on the couch. The entire place smells like the sea breeze with a hint of lavender, and it's a bit warmer than the rest of the tower. And, most importantly, there's a giant ass dog standing in front of them.

Bucky is pretty sure it's staring into the remnants of his soul.

It's a beautiful dog, really. Sleek black fur, powerful legs and a big chest. A sea green collar with a bow on it, and a giant scruff reminiscent of a lion's mane. He can't make out the tags, no matter how hard he tries. The dog slowly makes its way towards him. And holy *shit*, its shoulders are level with his waist.

Cautiously, Bucky sticks a hand out. It noses his hand for a second, and he can't help but feel like he's being judged. Something about this moment just seems inexplicably important.

Eventually, the dog just huffs, warm breath tickling his hand, and pads back to the couch, seemingly appeased. Behind him, Jackson gives a considering hum. Bucky just blinks a couple times, then mentally shrugs. He's still fairly shaken up from the session. He doesn't have the mental capacity for this, right now.

Jackson waves a hand towards the living room. "You can sit anywhere."

Bucky drifts towards the living room, eventually choosing the sole armchair. Now that he's sitting, he becomes uncomfortably aware of just how tired he is.

The whole BARF experience felt strange. Watching his own memories as a third party, standing a few feet away from events that happened eighty years ago, ones that he wasn't even sure had really happened...

All things considered, it could have been worse. It didn't fry his brain, at least. Not that he thought it would. Shuri and Stark were way better than that.

"Here." Bucky looked up, and Jackson was standing in front of him, a glass of water in his hand. He pressed it into Bucky's palm, and then stood there until he drank it all. Seemingly satisfied, he took the glass and went back to the kitchen.

From the fridge, he called, "What kind of sandwiches do you like? Is ham and cheese alright?"

"...What?"

Jackson frowned slightly. "Oh, are you allergic?"

"I—no?"

"Okay..." Jackson said slowly. "So is that a yes to ham and cheese?"

Bucky felt color rise to his cheeks. "You don't need to make me anything. I'm fine."

“That’s not what I asked.” He noted.

Bucky sighed. “Yeah. Ham and cheese is great, thank you.”

Two minutes later he received a plate with a ham and cheese sandwich, cut in triangles, a pile of baby carrots, a bag of chips, along with another glass of water. Bucky stares down at it for a long second. An hour ago, he never would have thought he would end up here. Having just had a surprisingly pleasant interaction with Stark, and now being fed lunch by the Commander that scared the shit out of him, in his *apartment* .

Jackson drops down on the couch across from him. He has an apple in one hand, a laptop in the other, earbuds in. Not looking up from his typing, he says, “Got a problem with triangles?”

“Excuse me?”

“You’ve been glaring at that sandwich like it insulted your honor. Got a problem with triangles?”

“No, no.”

“Good. Triangle sandwiches are the only acceptable kind.”

“I just... You really didn’t have to...”

Jackson just rolls his eyes. “Eat the damn sandwich, Barnes.”

He eats the damn sandwich. It’s pretty good. And at Jackson’s raised brow, he eats the carrots and the chips and drinks all the water, too.

After that, they sat in calm silence. Bucky curled his limbs up onto the armchair, leaning against one of the arms. Maybe BARF had taken a little more out of him than he had thought, because suddenly, he felt like he really needed a nap. Which was ridiculous. He was a super soldier, the former Winter Soldier, Hydra’s greatest assassin. He didn’t *nap*.

Jackson took another bite out of his apple, still typing one handed. “Hey, are you and Romanoff close?”

Bucky blinked at the slightly off question, then shrugged. “Not really. You might have been able to call us friends, but she was only really close with Barton.”

He received a hum in response. Jackson then looked up at him. “You want to say anything to her?” He nodded towards his computer. “I’m writing her.”

It took a second for Bucky’s brain to catch up. Only one person wrote Romanoff, ever. “Wait, you...you’re *that* Jackson? Ex-SHIELD Agent Jackson? *Agent Jackson who got shot three times on live TV?* You’re that Jackson?”

“Well, somebody has to be.”

Bucky just stared at him for a long second. Jackson didn’t even twitch.

“...You know what? Tell her I said hi.”

Jackson just gave a single nod and resumed his typing. Bucky settled back into the armchair, once again fighting sleep in the returned silence. He’d already eaten this guy’s food, he didn’t need to fall asleep in his living room, too.

Bucky had been trained to stay awake for weeks on end, alright? Staying awake until he was deemed fit to go would be no problem. His record was lasting *two weeks* before showing the slightest signs of exhaustion. He’d be fine.

He barely intercepted the throw blanket tossed at him. “Go to sleep.” Jackson said shortly.

...

Okay, Bucky knew that he hadn’t miraculously lost eight decades of training in, what, a year and a half? Jesus, Jackson was *good*. So good that Bucky wasn’t going to bother trying to lie. He just unfolded the blanket and curled up under it. It was nice; made of a bunch of different smaller

crocheted squares stitched together into a blanket.

“Thanks,” He said quietly. Jackson just nodded.

As he drifted away, he inspected them. There was a sky blue one with what looked like lightning bolts, a black one with a skull on it, a lavender one with golden thread, and so on. Right in the middle, though, there was a gray one with a Yankees cap on it. It was easily the more intricate square, and it looked like hours had been spent on it.

Bucky fell asleep, idly tracing the patterns.

When Barnes’s heartbeat finally leveled out, Percy released a quiet sigh.

He let his computer rest on his thighs, leaning back against the couch. He pulled his earbuds out for a moment, stopping FRIDAY’s rereading of his letter. Like always, it was pretty short.

First BARF session was today. No complications. We’ll see how it goes.

Yes, it’s true. It’s called SWORD. Why?

Barnes says hello, by the way.

-PJ

It was risky giving Romanoff the name of the team. But, for some reason, Percy felt like it was the right choice. Maybe he trusted her more than he thought.

Across from him, Barnes shifts a little in his sleep. Normally, Percy would be worried about nightmares brought up by BARF, but the man just seems too exhausted for that. Tony had warned that was a potential side effect. Out of all things that could happen, though, that was barely a problem.

Percy hears the rustling of the blanket, the steady breathing. He taps a single finger on his keyboard, running his finger over the little raised dots. Next to him, Mrs. O'Leary lets out a soft snore.

At first, Percy had been a little hesitant to bring Barnes in his apartment. To let him sleep on his couch, to give him the blanket Hazel and Frank had made.

(*For couple's bonding*, they said. Percy didn't buy it. They were just nerds who liked to crochet. "I know you can't really see the designs," Hazel had offered sheepishly, "But we made sure to put a bunch of bright colors. It's also really soft!")

But Mrs. O'Leary had given Barnes a tentative approval, and, well, who was Percy to argue?

Chapter End Notes

reminder! every time percy is described as 'looking' at something from an outside pov, it is the mist! percy doesn't actually turn to look at stuff; tony is starting to see through the mist layer now. a little bit with peter, too.

tony and bucky are so fucking awkward i love them

in the first book when tony described percy's apartment as looking mainly unlived in vs now :)

mrs o'leary judgment commence

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Favor For An Old Friend

Chapter Summary

“Hey, Fri. Do me a favor?”

“Of course.” Her voice floods through his earbuds.

“Thanks. Dial this number,” He recites it from memory.

Chapter Notes

the one person who requested this specific character content at the end, your time has come. rise. rejoice.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Monday, July 21

1:51 AM

Stark Tower, NY

She was smiling at him. He could hear it in her voice. “Really, Jackson?”

Percy had huffed, crossing his arms. “Yes, Johnson. Really.”

*Her laugh reminded him of the rain. “That’s—I’m sorry,” She doubled over. “Your poor mother,” She’d gasped out. “The **fuse box**?”*

“The entire museum went dark. Two guards eventually found me crouched in an electrical closet, still chewing on the cords.” He admitted, face warm.

The barracks were freezing, like always. But around the two of them, it felt warmer, somehow. She

threw her head back, laughing again. "That's awful. How did you not get electrocuted?"

"Lucky, I guess."

Still holding in giggles, she raised a brow. "You? Lucky? I'll believe it when I see it."

He reached across the space in between their cots to shove her in the shoulder. Their knees knocked together for a second, and she stuck her tongue out at him. Percy tilted his head towards the flap of their tent. She follows his gaze.

"You alright?"

Percy frowns, furrowing his brow. "Yeah," He eventually settles on. "Yeah, I'm fine. I just...I dunno." He resists the urge to wrap his hand around Riptide. He tries for a smile, instead. "Just tired, I guess."

Johnson rolls her eyes. "To absolutely nobody's surprise. You sleep even less than I do, PJ. Turn in early. You won't miss much. We're almost done."

He sighs, tilting his face up towards the top of the tent. "You know what, I just might." As is regulation, his bed is perfectly made. He slips off his boots and begins to untuck the thin blanket as Johnson stands, dusting off her pants.

"I'll probably come in, too, before it gets too late." She offers, fixing her hair. "I'll cover for you."

From where he's unmaking his bed, Percy flashes her a smile. "Thanks."

As she's waving him off, he fully untucks the blanket and tosses it on her bed. He drops down onto the hard mattress, stretching out the best he can. Percy closes his eyes, taking in a few measured breaths. Before he can relax completely, though, she speaks up from the tent entrance. "Hey, I thought I told you not to do that." Her voice is hard, stern.

He raised a brow, eyes still shut. "And I thought I told you I didn't need it?"

Johnson huffs, frustrated. "It's your blanket, PJ. It's freezing out. I don't need it that bad."

"Okay, first of all, it's not that cold. Second of all, the temperature doesn't bother me much, not like it does you. I sleep just fine."

"That's what I'm worried about. Hypothermia isn't something to scoff at. You...you probably wouldn't even wake up."

He doesn't tell her just how intimately aware he is of the effects of hypothermia. In his head, Gaea sleepily calls him her son.

"It's not that cold, Johnson." He repeats.

She makes a noise. "Bullshit! It's November, you idiot."

Percy frowns. Huh, he could've sworn it was earlier in the year. "November isn't that bad." He stubbornly sticks with.

"Yeah, maybe not in Bangkok like last time, but it's fucking Ontario, Jackson. No amount of 'liking the cold' is gonna help you out, here. Take your damn blanket back."

"I'm not going to take it—" He stops. Every muscle in his body freezes, breath getting caught in his throat. "What did you say?" He says slowly.

"I said, take your damn blanket back."

"No," Percy says, slowly sitting up. "Before that."

She blinks, clearly unamused. "It's November. In Ontario. You're going to need that blanket."

"November. In Ontario." Percy repeats, voice barely a whisper.

Her ire falls to worry. “Are you alright?” She takes a few steps closer to him, straying away from the tent flap. “Did you hit your head, or something?”

Percy stands and closes the distance between her fast. Too fast, for a regular human.

“What are you—”

He grabs her shoulders. “We shouldn’t be here. Neither of us. Especially not you. We need to go, like now.”

“The hell has gotten into you? We need to finish cleaning the site—”

The gunfire rips through the tent, punching through their bodies like they were made of tissue paper. Johnson falls first, collapsing forward into Percy. It takes longer for him to go down, enhanced durability and all. But even he can’t survive a machine gun firing right outside their tent.

They end up collapsed next to each other, demigod blood mixing with mortal. Not that anyone could tell, though. It all looked the same, crimson and dark and fresh.

They aren’t found for days, almost an entire week. Not them, nor their entire regiment of men sent to clean up the raided Hydra base. Their bodies don’t rot—it’s far too cold for that. Instead, their skins pale, their lips turn blue, their blood, once hot and running, is but a thin layer of red frost on their clothes.

“You got that last one, Tones?”

“No problem, Platypus.”

Iron Man ducks under the flap of the command tent. It’s the only one they haven’t yet checked. For information, for clues,... for bodies to bring home. Personally, Tony just didn’t get it. They had raided the base only a few days prior; freed all the prisoners, took a crazy Doctor guy into custody... What on Earth could’ve caused something like this?

He stops in the entryway. Despite it being the command tent, it's the same size as all the others. There are two desks set up in the corner, covered in loose papers. In the other corner, two cots are shoved together, only a few precious feet apart.

There's another desk in the middle of the tent, this one covered in what looks like a map. Tony leans over it. A few written messages from HQ lay there as well. He slowly makes his way around the table, intent on reading them, when he sees them.

Two bodies, laying only a few inches away from each other. Their hands are stretched out, reaching for the other. Their torsos are riddled with bullet holes.

The woman is dark skinned, hair done in dozens of small, neat braids, pulled into a bun atop her head. Based on her clothes, she's the captain in charge of the whole operation.

The man's skin is lighter, a rich bronze. His hair is inky black, falling across his forehead and eyes. A few visible scars litter his skin.

They must have been caught unaware. He's not even wearing shoes, Just socks. They're most definitely not regulation, though. One is patterned with Flounder from The Little Mermaid, and the other has what looks like a pizza pattern.

Slowly, Tony steps over them. The cot on the left is partially stripped, down to the sheets. It's rumpled, clearly having been recently inhabited. By the man, most likely. The bed on the right is perfectly made.

The only thing out of place is the extra blanket on top of it, abandoned.

Tony swallows, and backtracks out of the tent. "Rhodes," He says hoarsely. "I found two more."

It's a shame, whoever they were. They both look so young.

His face is wet. Without even opening his eyes, Percy reaches up and scrubs at his cheeks. Mrs. O'Leary stands above him, making a worried noise. He doesn't trust himself to speak without his voice cracking, so he just reaches up and rests a hand on her head.

Dreams like that aren't uncommon. Where he stayed in the HSRD, collaborating with Johnson, eventually moving under her division. Where he joined the National Guard instead of SHIELD, where they spent most of their days together, awake and asleep. Where he died with her, cleaning up Ontario, like he should have.

He scooches into a sitting position, leaning his head back against the headboard. Mrs. O'Leary wiggles into his arms. He holds on to her tight, pressing his face into her fur to muffle his broken sobs.

Monday, July 21

9:46 AM

The Hub, NY

The Commander looks tired. Well, he always looks tired. Just more so, today.

Lee quietly sits next to him, and pushes a fresh cup of coffee towards him. He shakes his head silently, giving her a strained smile.

"You sure? You look like you need it."

He flips to the fourth page of the report in front of him. "It'll just make me tired, if anything." He gives a loose shrug. "ADHD."

She hums, sliding the cup back towards herself. "I didn't know you were ADHD." She comments, taking a slow sip. It's still warm, but not too hot, and plain black. The best way, in her opinion.

He gives her a strained smile. "I try not to broadcast it too much." He admits. "It's..."

“Easy to want to be ashamed of?” She finished. “I get it.” Lee shrugs. “I’d always hold back my stims during basic training. I was worried, I guess. Don’t know of what.”

Jackson looks a little surprised, but nods. “Yeah. Exactly like that.”

Lee takes another slow sip of her coffee. The caffeine never really affected her much, but she always liked the bitter taste. “You don’t have to worry about it, here. Half of us are neurodivergent, too. And the other half are just decent people.”

His lips twitch, and Lee mentally high-fives herself. “I know.”

“Good.” They sit in a long silence. It’s not awkward at all; it’s the comfortable kind, only broken by Jackson flipping a page or her taking a long slurp of her drink. It’s nice, really. Since SWORD formed, she actually hadn’t spent that much time with Jackson. Since...whatever had happened that landed him in that coma, actually.

She’d wanted to ask, at the time. But after he was healthy and getting around again, one look at his face told her it was a bad idea. Lee was never really the nosy type, anyways. Jackson had the right to his secrets, as did the rest of them. She was worried, sure, but her curiosity had long since faded.

Quitting SI’s reception job to join SWORD had been a no brainer. Not that she hated her previous job—quite the opposite, actually. It was steady, but not boring. There was no danger of being shot, thanks to FRIDAY, and she got to interact with all the crazy people who believed they were the next potential Avenger.

But she missed actually making a difference. There was nothing wrong with a desk job, of course, but it wasn’t enough for her. She wanted to help people, as cliché as it sounded. She’d become a field medic for a reason. And that reason wasn’t resuscitating the guy who took a bunch of narcotics and busted into the lobby of SI thinking he was Thor, reincarnated. Seriously, Thor wasn’t even *dead*.

She’d missed her job. She’d missed Jackson, Dan, Ross, Bridgette, Aspen, Mal. Mrs. O’Leary, too.

Plus there was the whole ‘everyone is corrupt and we want to take them down brick by brick’ thing. That was a factor, too.

Lee was surprised, though, at the idea of SWORD, when Jackson proposed it to her in that cafe. Not at Fury's decision—Jackson was the obvious choice. She was surprised that he decided to go with it. Perseus *I don't even listen to traffic lights* Jackson, taking orders from Fury?

Strange.

Lee leaned forward on the table, resting her elbows. She holds her chin up with her palm, and turns her head towards him. "Why'd you do this?"

"What?"

"SWORD. Why'd you take on all this responsibility? I'd got the impression you were kinda done with," She waved a hand around. "All this."

Jackson shrugs. "Nobody else would." He said simply.

Lee hummed. Yeah, that, on the other hand, sounded like him and his Atlas complex. But, she noted, narrowing her eyes, that couldn't be it.

He noticed her scrutiny without even trying. "And..." He sighed softly. "Did I ever tell you about my friend, Johnson?"

Lee frowned, trying to place the name, but ultimately coming up blank. "No."

Jackson pushed the papers away from him, leaning back in his chair. "We met when I was with the HSRD. We...we got close. She helped me out a lot."

"Like, with the whole Deathstroke thing?"

A choking noise was her response. "You know about that?!"

“Jackson,” She said slowly. “Just because you wore a helmet doesn’t mean I couldn’t recognize my friend. I mean, a mercenary with a xiphos who hunts abusers for sport?”

He groaned. “Was it that obvious?”

Lee kept her face serious for as long as she could, stifling a smile into her coffee cup. “Nah, I’m just joking. Most people haven’t even heard that name. That’s not what gave you away.”

Jackson put his head in his hands. “What was it?”

Lee took a long sip. “You can wear a full coverage helmet, but you can’t mask that ass.”

Making a noise like a dying whale, he looked up at her. Or... did he? She blinked, and for a second, he was staring blankly over her shoulder. Which, makes a lot more sense, how would he be able to meet her eyeline? And, wait, why didn’t she notice this before—

“I hate it here.” He muttered. “But, yeah. She was the one who helped me start out.” His face slowly sobered. Jackson fiddled with the corner of his sleeve, biting the inside of his cheek. “She died last November.” He revealed. “Cleaning up after the Avengers mission site. They didn’t have a designated team for it, so her National Guardsmen did it. They weren’t in the loop of everything that happened, and...” He swallowed. “And every single one of them was massacred. Not even a few days after we left.”

Lee leaned back, stunned. “Shit,” She muttered. “That’s...heavy.”

Jackson laughed bitterly. “Yeah.” He rubbed a hand across his forehead. “That’s where SWORD comes in. We work directly for the WSC, keep in loop with the Avengers. We’re trained specially for this, and so nothing like that will happen again.”

Lee wasn’t quite sure if he was trying to convince himself, or her. She just nodded. “Johnson sounds amazing. Must’ve been a saint to put up with you for all those years, at least.”

He cracked a smile. “Yeah. She was the best,”

She stands up, and then hesitantly rests a hand on his shoulder. “Jackson... You know I owe you. Like, a lot, for what you did for me and Dan after the file dump. So I’m going to start repaying you right now by telling you to take it easy.” He opened his mouth, but she quickly added, “You don’t have to sleep, just... relax for a bit, alright? We don’t like seeing you like this... and I doubt Johnson would’ve either, if she’s as amazing as you say.”

She waited there until he nodded. “I’ll clock out in a few.” He said softly. “Thanks.”

“Hey, what are old friends who owe you a big favor for?” She nudges him with the arm not holding her drink.

Jackson paused for a second. A smile, a real one, this time, slowly stretched over his face. “Yeah.” He echoed. “Old friends who owe you a big favor.”

Lee stared at him for a moment longer. “You know what, you seem like you just had some sort of moment. I’m... I’m just gonna go.” She slowly backed out of the room. “Good luck with... whatever you just thought of.”

As she walks back down the hallway to the conference room, where Ross is undoubtedly waiting for her, she takes another long sip of her coffee. He’s fine. Probably. That slightly evil smile was going to turn out alright. For them, at least.

As Percy sweeps all his papers back into his bag, he pulls out his phone and a pair of earbuds. He’s still trying to organize everything in his arms when he strides out of the building, out of the garage and onto the sidewalk, Mrs. O’Leary trotting after him.

His phone is awkwardly held in between his ear and shoulder as he finally gives up and crams the rest of the documents in there.

“Hey, Fri. Do me a favor?”

“Of course.” Her voice floods through his earbuds.

“Thanks. Dial this number,” He recites it from memory.

Not a second later, the sound of ringing. Hands finally free, he speeds up a little, using one to hold his phone as he normally would. On the fourth ring, someone picks up. They don’t say anything, just wait silently.

Percy smiles slightly, trying to hold in an eye roll. “Hey, Wade.” He greets as he crosses the street. “How've you been?”

Chapter End Notes

WADE TIME WADE TIME WADE TIME WADE TIME WADE TIME

i think prophetic dreams + trauma would make for some funky 'what might have been' dreams, and you can never tell if they're true or not

no hate to other authors and their work, but often, if percy's adhd is represented at all, it's as a 'oh look at this FidGEtY mAn' and nothing else and it's a lot more than that!!! especially for percy, who spent a lot of time and effort trying to be as unnoticeable as possible, he'd do his best to pass for being neurotypical. being able to openly talk about it with people in his government workplace is a big step for him :)

also lee being like 'wait a damn minute--'

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Recalibrated

Chapter Notes

thanks to edene and alex for powering through this chapter amidst tears :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Monday, July 21

10:19 AM

Outside The Hub, NY

“...Jackson?”

“Unfortunately,” Percy replies as he crosses the road.

“Damn, man. You ain’t dead yet? Could’ve sworn you kicked it in Jersey.”

Percy made an offended noise in the back of his throat. “If I’m dying, it’s sure as hell not gonna be in fuckin’ *Jersey*. Jesus, Wade.” He hissed like there was no greater insult.

“Right. My bad.”

“How’ve you been?”

“Eh,” Wade humms. “You know how it is. Waiting for the author to be able to fit me into the storyline. I’m a fan favorite, did you know?”

“Really? Well, good for you, Wade.”

“Thanks. What’ve you been up to?”

Percy shoves his hands in his pockets. “Oh, you know. Died a little, came back. Got a new job.”

“It’s like that sometimes.”

“Indeed.” He turns another corner. The weather is nice out; sunny, but with a little breeze. It’s a pleasant break from the heat wave that had been rolling through the last few weeks. It didn’t bother Percy, who drank liquid fire for a couple months, but Lee and Dan complained so much he wished he’d gone deaf instead of blind. “Listen, Wade, I need a favor.”

He can practically hear the squint over the line.

“You owe me, remember? Duffle bag of heads?” Percy reminds.

“Oh, shit, right. Yeah, no prob. Whatd’ya need?”

“I need you to look into something for me. You alone right now?”

He hears rustling over the line. “Assuming we aren’t in that sucky ass zombie comic line, yes.”

“Cool. It’s called Project Integrity. I’d do it myself, but...” Percy purses his lips as he reaches the tower. “I’ve been a little busy lately.”

“Vague. I like it. I’ll look into it pronto, boo.” Wade makes obnoxious kissy noises over the line. “See you soon!”

He huffs a laugh. “Bye, Wade.”

Pocketing his phone, Percy ducks into the service entrance of the tower. Lee was right—maybe he should take a break. Hell, he might even be able to catch an hour or two of sleep.

It might be nice.

Monday, July 21

11:49 AM

Stark Tower, NY

It was not nice.

Honestly, what was he expecting? Sometimes, Percy still shocked himself with his own optimism.

Johnson bled out next to him. When Percy lost control in that brick building, she was there. When he was scared and confused and lashed out trying to make everything *stop hurting* he killed her. She died slowly, choking on her own blood.

Then he blinked, and he was standing in a meadow. It smelled like fresh rain and morning dew, and the gentle breeze tickled the long grass.

Annabeth smiled at him. “Hey, Seaweed Brain.”

His face took on it’s own grin; tired, wearier, but a smile. “Hi, Wise Girl.”

She took his hand, gently tugging him along. He followed her without question. “What’s going on, Perce? You look tired.”

He scrubbed a hand across his face with his free hand. “I don’t even know where to start,” He muttered. She just shrugged. “Wherever you want.”

Percy thought for a second as they went through the grass. “Barnes had his first session. I... I don’t know what he saw when he did it, but he was sad. And scared, really scared, at the end.”

Annabeth tilted her head, indicating she was listening.

“He had to be under watch for an hour or two after. I’m the only one who can do it. Just... just in case.”

She paused. “In case?”

Percy swallowed, looking down. “In case he goes back to the Soldier.” He says. “In case I have to kill him.”

“Oh, Gods.”

His voice breaks. “I don’t want to kill him, Annie.”

Her hand slowly comes to cover her mouth. Then, she steps forward and wraps her arms around him. Though she’s a few inches shorter, he leans forward and buries his face in her shoulder. It isn’t the first time they’ve hugged since she died; far from it. And every time, she still smells like strawberry shampoo.

“I’m so sorry, Percy.” She murmurs. “I’m so sorry you’ve been put in that position.”

And the worst part might just be the fact that it’s nobody’s fault. Well, nobody Percy can get to at the moment.

Eventually, they continue walking, across the little meadow, to the edge of a little stream, running gently over round, flat stones. They both sit at the edge of it, Annabeth slipping off her shoes and dipping her feet into the cool water.

“He bothers you.” She notes. Percy mentally sighs. There’s no hiding stuff from Annabeth, not when it’s concerning him.

“In a way.” He agrees. His hands drift to the grass, idly plucking a single blade and running it between his fingers. “Barnes...he reminds me of myself, kind of. It sucks.” Percy says honestly.

“How so?”

“He got conscripted, you know. Didn’t have a choice whether or not to fight. And he lost pretty much everything because of it.”

“Is that how you see yourself?” Annabeth says quietly. “Not having a choice?”

“We were twelve, Annie. Even if we did choose, we were too young. It wasn’t really ours.” He finds himself saying. She doesn’t offer anything to the contrary.

“He hurt people he didn’t mean to. A lot of people.” Percy murmurs. “The thing is, though, it took a decade of mind wiping and brainwashing before he killed someone. Before he hurt people, every part of who he was had to be erased. I wish I could say the same.”

Annabeth turns to him, her eyes wide. “Percy...” She whispers. “Is this about Ontario?”

“How can it not be? I...I know they were all bad people. I know it. They would have been executed anyway. It’s policy for all willing Hydra operatives. But...” He shakes his head. “I can still remember how fast their hearts were beating. Some of them cried.”

She crosses her arms. “Perseus Jackson, that was *not* your fault.” She says adamantly. “You got drugged by some *nutjob* with a God complex! You’d been kidnapped and tortured and experimented on, and then they tried to kill you! They *did* kill you, Percy. You were *scared*. What happened there wasn’t your fault in the slightest, you hear me?”

When he doesn’t respond, she grabs his arm. “Tell me you know it wasn’t your fault. Please.”

He just shakes his head. Annabeth sighs, and drops her head down to his shoulder. “You’ll figure it out eventually.” She promises. “When you do, I’m *so* gonna say I told you so.”

In spite of himself, he laughs.

Monday, July 21

3:52 PM

Stark Tower, NY

Bucky didn't really expect to find himself in Stark's lab so soon. It had just taken a few odd twitches from his arm under FRIDAY's everwatchful gaze, and he'd been given a summons to the lower levels.

"Hey, Icy Pop," Stark called, not looking up from his project. "Take a seat anywhere."

Silently mouthing *Icy Pop* to himself, he obliged, choosing a lone seat behind a cluttered table. Stark worked for another few minutes before putting down his tools with a thump. He then pushed away from his worktable, rolling over to Bucky.

"Heard your arm was acting up," He opened. Bucky nodded slowly. "You want me to look at it, or should I call Shuri?"

"I..." Bucky trailed off, speechless. He swallowed. "You wouldn't mind looking at it?"

Stark waved a hand. "Eh," Was all he offered.

"If you wouldn't mind." Bucky finally settled on.

Stark flashed him a grin, and then produced a small screwdriver from seemingly nowhere. If Bucky hadn't been so bewildered in general, he would've been a little worried.

The engineer was surprisingly amicable as he gently pried open the panel on Bucky's shoulder. Despite it all, Bucky found him easy to talk to. Stark, mainly, did all the talking. He spoke mainly of his two best friends; Colonel Rhodes and Pepper Potts. Bucky took note of the way Stark softened when he spoke of them; the unconscious upturn of his lips, and lighter tone of his voice.

It was odd, certainly. A man made of iron who's eyes shone when he talked about meeting

Rhodes.

Bucky liked it.

“Well,” Stark eventually said, after poking around the wires for a bit. “My best guess, it just needs to be recalibrated. I didn’t look around much, but I doubt there’s nothing wrong with it. Princess Shuri built it, didn’t she?”

“Yeah, she did. Recalibrated?”

“Mhm.” Stark confirmed. “It just happens sometimes, it’s got nothing to do with how good the actual prosthetic is.”

“You don’t think there’s anything actually wrong with it?” Bucky asked, relieved. Over time, he’d begun to tolerate the light maintenance Shuri had done, but he really hated the few times she’d had to take it off and really look at it.

Stark made a noise in the back of his throat. “Nah. The smartest person on this damn planet built it in the best labs possible, I’m sure it’s fine.”

And that brought Bucky a little pause. It seemed Tony Stark was full of surprises, because Bucky never thought he’d admit someone was smarter than him, and definitely not with the casual ease he had.

He felt a little flash of guilt, there. The only reason he thought that was because of the way Steve talked about him, and as much as it hurt him, he knew Steve wasn’t a reliable source of information anymore. The only other influence that shaped his opinion was the wispy memories of Howard Stark and his sharp grin.

“You know,” He said aloud before he could stop himself, “You’re a lot different than your father was.”

Stark froze. “What?”

“The Howard I knew...that man would rather die than admit there was someone out there who was smarter than him, I think.” Bucky elaborated. Stark stared at him for a long time, and internally, Bucky panicked. Shit, was that the wrong thing to say?

But after a moment of scrutiny, Stark smiled at him. Actually smiled, eyes crinkling. “Good.” Was all he said.

Eventually, Stark resealed the panel, and gave the arm a pat. “Give it a few minutes, then move around a bit, see if there’s anything wrong.”

Bucky nodded. “Thanks, Dr. Stark.”

While he waited for his arm to finish calibration, Bucky took a good look at the man. His hair was a rat’s nest, sticking up in every odd direction. He was wearing an old shirt and jeans, both smudged in grease and oil. Bucky counted at least five empty coffee cups in his view alone, and the dark circles under his eyes...

“You look like me when Hydra was into grease paint.” Bucky noted.

Stark made an odd choking noise. For a second, Bucky thought that maybe making a Winter Soldier joke wasn’t the best idea, but then he realized the man was just choking on a mouthful of cold coffee, he’d laughed so suddenly.

“Rude,” Stark eventually gasped out.

Bucky just shrugged. “When’s the last time you slept?”

“Ugh, you sound like Jackson.” Stark grumbled. Huh. So the Commander’s insistence on Bucky eating and sleeping wasn’t out of character. Then, a tad petulant, “Friday.”

“*Friday?*” Bucky repeated incredulously. “What the hell do you mean, *Friday?* ”

“Friday.” Tony repeated, defensive.

Bucky took a deep breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I..." Another deep breath. "I don't have the right to judge you. I'm sorry. That just sounds unhealthy."

"No, no. I'm a train wreck of a human being. My life is in shambles. It's okay."

"Oh."

Peter was starting to hate AcDec practice, just a little.

Cindy and Abe had insisted on cranking up the newly-working AC every time. Peter almost regretted fixing it. Almost, but not actually, because it made them so happy. So he just grumbled a little and burrowed into his seat.

They'd done the group part of the practice, so now they were sitting silently, reviewing. Peter was halfway through the section of application of thermodynamics, *again*, when MJ dropped down into the seat next to him.

He looked up from his book, a slightly quizzical look on his face. "Hi," he said, confused, but beaming all the same.

She rolled her eyes at him, and slung the bombers jacket off her shoulders. She shoved it into his chest without a word, then pulled out her own book and started reading. Peter stared down at it for a second. "MJ?"

"You're shivering." She said shortly.

"Oh. Uhm. I can't take your jacket from you, though."

"I'm not freezing my ass off. Percy told me about your whole thing with the cold. Wear the jacket."

His voice was quiet. “Thank you.” He pulled it on. It was warm, soft, and a little bit big on him. MJ was almost half a foot taller than him—she was strangely tall, and he was always on the shorter side, even for an AFAB guy.

They get a few more minutes of reading in before she speaks up. “What’s up with you?”

He blinks. “What do you mean?”

She looks at him out of the corner out of her eye. “You’ve been acting a little weird since Friday.”

Oh.

Peter’s brow furrows a little, and he looks down. “I’m...fine. I just,” He sighs. “Do you ever get the feeling that...That if something had ever been a little different, maybe things could have been better?”

MJ blinks. “Woah, Parker. That’s pretty existential.” Her tone is light, but she’s giving him a worried look.

He gives a light shrug, then turns to her, expectant.

MJ sighs. “I don’t know. I guess. I mean, butterfly effect and all that. But, some things, I think, are inevitable. Some things just *are*. They’re fixed points in time, universal constants.” She waves a loose hand. “You know?”

“Do you think me...being who I am is one of those constants?”

She raises a brow. “A spider enthusiast?” She says dryly.

Peter huffs out a laugh. “Yeah, that.”

“Oh, I dunno. I mean, I doubt every single version of you decided on the bright red spandex, but...” MJ clears her throat, looking down. “I’m not a betting girl, but if I were, I’d put my money on every single Peter Parker out there being a hero.” And Peter must be seeing things at this point, because he *swears* MJ’s cheeks are a little red.

“Thanks, MJ.” He always means it, but this time, he really, *really* does.

She smiles at him. And MJ’s smiles come in a rare quantity, so he makes sure to savor it.

When he’s leaving AcDec, walking home, hands stuffed in the pockets of MJ’s jacket (“*Bring it back next time. Maybe then I can make sure you’ll actually show up.*”), he still thinks about it. Did every Peter Parker lose their parents? Did every single one go to Ben and May? Did every single Peter choose to actually *become* a Peter? Was losing Ben just a thing that happened, or was it just him?

Was it always a spider? Oscorp? Did they all have two kickass best friends, an extraordinarily chaotic demigod/ex-merc/ex-agent/commander who looked out for them? A caffeine-fueled mother hen of an inventor who made them a suit, who helped teach them to code, who begrudgingly let them keep a kitten he found on patrol in the tower for a whole week?

Peter wasn’t sure, but he really hoped so.

He hoped every Peter had a May, a Ned, a MJ, a Percy and a Mr. Stark.

He hoped every Peter still had a Richard, a Mary, a Ben.

And he really, really hoped every Peter didn’t have a Skip.

Chapter End Notes

nobody:

tony: my life is a flaming pile of teletubby shit and i am fully aware of it

wade time :) and don’t worry, he’ll be back soon

yall: what's your source on how the bionic arm works?

me: my source is that i made it the fuck up

...i put so much angst in here. y'all must be going through so much.

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Pizza And Whipped Cream

Chapter Summary

A consistent theme in his life; his good mood doesn't last.

In fact, it is gone almost immediately, when he stops dead on a less-traveled path in the park. Mrs. O'Leary looks up at him questionably, but he doesn't respond. Lucas's haunted voice from a few weeks ago hits him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sunday, July 27

2:03 AM

Stark Tower, NY

You know, when Bucky first came to the tower, he was terrified. He knew, by some miracle, that Tony Stark decided to help him. But he also knew not to have high expectations; he expected anything from hostility to downright aggression.

If you had told the Bucky Barnes of a month ago that he wouldn't mind sitting on the couch and watching a movie with Tony Stark, he would've called you insane.

If you had told him they watched the first three Star Wars movies, that Stark seemed to have an odd fondness for, he would have politely recommended you seek professional help.

But most of all, this? This was not what he expected.

The day had started out normal enough. He was due for another BARF session in a week, so they went down and ran another diagnostic. Since there was no chance of him going apeshit, as Stark put it, Jackson wasn't shadowing them.

Like usual, it was fairly quiet. With the occasional burst of conversation, which inevitably shriveled into semi-awkward silence.

Eventually, Stark put down his tools and sighed. “You’re all good.”

“Thanks,” Bucky said.

Then they just sat there for another minute, not making eye contact.

“God, this is awful.” Bucky blurted.

Stark blinked. “Yep.” He leaned back in his rolling chair. “Wanna go to the gym, beat the shit out of each other, and then call it even and act like normal people?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Stark double checked with his AI that Jackson had, indeed, left the building. (“*That man is a bloodhound when it comes to me doing potentially dangerous stuff,*”) Then, they went down to the gyms, and they, indeed, beat the everloving *shit* out of each other.

Stark was *good*. Like, really good. He wasn’t a match for Bucky in hand-to-hand, but he doubted there was anyone who really was. But Bucky could easily see why he was often called the *Invincible Iron Man*.

When Bucky had expressed that aloud, the two of them sitting on the bench against the gym wall, sweaty and worn out, Stark had rolled his eyes. “Never call me that again.” He took a long swig from his water bottle, then looked over. “Tony will suffice.”

“Call me Bucky.” He offered in return.

They stayed there for almost half an hour longer; Bucky asked one question about the suit, and it all went downhill from there. The thing was a technological *marvel*, alright? Bucky himself was no genius, but he always had a thing for cool science stuff.

And, well, Stark just seemed happy to talk about it. When he did, his eyes lit up, gesturing wildly

with his hands, words getting faster and faster until Bucky could barely keep up. He didn't mind. It was nice, just sitting there and listening to him in the giant, empty gym. It was so achingly different from Wakanda; the sharp tension between all the Rogues, Ayo's firm but kind demeanor, Shuri's sly snark.

In some ways, he missed Wakanda. Afternoons curled up in the library, going on runs with Ayo and the Dora, getting his ass kicked by said Dora, chatting with T'Challa and spending time in the lab with Shuri, getting caught up on pop culture.

He was still uncertain of what the technical definition of *yeet* was, but Shuri assured him that there wasn't one; it was just about the feeling you put behind it.

He missed Romanoff's silent support, the sole cupcake she left by his door the day he got the bad news about BARF. He never did thank her for that. Bucky silently resolved to ask Jackson to tell her next time he wrote. Barton was funny and compassionate, Lang was dorky but kind, Wilson was empathetic and always had a smile to spare.

Steve. He missed Steve.

But whether that was because they were an ocean apart, or because his Steve hadn't been around since the '40s, he didn't know.

Maybe they were just different people, now. And that was okay. It hurt, but it was okay.

Tony cut himself off in the middle of a rant about the flight systems, rubbing the back of his neck. "Sorry about that," He said sheepishly, "I...get carried away, sometimes. You probably didn't want to hear all that."

Bucky abruptly straightened and turned to look at him. "Are you kidding me? That's some of the coolest shit I've heard in my *life*."

Tony laughed. Bucky likes making people laugh, he thinks.

"You said you were getting caught up on modern media, right?" Bucky nodded in agreement. Tony grinned. "Cool. You ever watched Star Wars?"

And so, they split ways to change and briefly shower, then reconvened on the couch. FRIDAY cued up the movie, and Tony made popcorn.

They watched the first, then the second, then the third. After the end credits rolled, Stark yawned. “Sorry, Icy Freeze. If I don’t go to bed in the next fifteen minutes, Fri’s gonna call Pepper.” He shuddered a little. “And that’s something I never want to happen again.”

Bucky waved him off, and said goodnight.

Tony Stark’s AI and CEO/best friend gently bullied him into sleeping.

God, he loved the twenty-first century.

After Tony left, Bucky didn’t make any move to get up. Halfway through the first movie, they’d both gotten fuzzy blankets from a basket on the side of one of the armchairs, and Bucky remained curled under it, hours later.

The Winter Soldier didn’t sleep unless told to.

Bucky Barnes was going to take a nap on the couch, in a sort of public area, under the watch of an omnipotent AI, on the 91st floor of the most advanced building in the entire country, after bidding Iron Man goodnight.

Which brought him to *here* .

His sleep had been fitful, plagued by memories of a life he didn’t fully remember, of shaking children and pleading adults. Every time, right before they died, they stopped begging. They just stared at him.

When Bucky had been woken up, it was to the faint sound of rustling. He was on alert immediately. Logically, there was no way an intruder got into the tower, but he had been jerked away from sleep in the middle of a particularly vivid reminiscion of a mission, and logic didn’t matter.

(*Two targets. Five collaterals. Never let yourself be seen, Soldat . No witnesses.*)

On light feet, he got off the couch, and crept towards the noise, pinpointing it to the kitchen. His hands were shaking, and he knew his face was considerably paler, but he went on.

When he turned the corner, he didn't know whether to start laughing, or to turn around and go back to sleep like nothing happened.

Commander Jackson was sitting on the counter, wearing rumpled sweats and a hoodie, idly swinging his legs. As Bucky got closer, he noticed he was eating something. Jackson finished chewing, swallowed, then groggily said, "Hey, James."

Yeah, being called James after all these years felt weird. But, definitely a good weird. He rounds the island, cautious and slow. "Hi,"

Jackson opens his mouth to say something, but pauses, his brow furrowing. Bucky expected a lot of things, the first time Jackson really talks to him, beyond just a professional courtesy. "Are you okay?" is not one of them.

He blanks, at first. Just stares, frozen. Then, finally, he ducks his head. "I'm...I've been better." He says nothing else, just comes fully into the kitchen. Jackson doesn't ask any further questions, to his relief.

Bucky comes to a full halt once he fully gets Jackson into his view. "What...what are you *eating*?"

Jackson blinked, looked down at his snack, then back at Bucky. "I think it's a piece of pizza with whipped cream that I folded up like a taco." He offered.

"Oh my god," Bucky whispered.

Jackson took another bite. "I've been awake for a long time."

“I can see that.”

“Good for you.”

After a second’s hesitation, Bucky pulls himself up on the counter opposite. He squints at the pizza. “Is...is it any good?”

Jackson just blinks at him for a few seconds, probably processing, then mutely shoves both the pizza box and the can of whipped cream towards him.

Bucky contemplates his life and just how much he wants Jackson to like him, before grabbing a slice. He loads it up with whipped cream, folds it like a soft taco, and crams half the thing in his mouth.

Jackson raises a brow. “Yeah?”

He chews for a long second, swallows, and nods. “Yeah.” He settles on.

“Hm.”

Jackson finishes his slice, and, clearly debating another, sighs. “You ever get homesick?”

The question throws him for a second, but he eventually nods. “Yeah. It’s...Is it weird to say I miss the Great Depression?”

He winces. “Sorry. That was probably insensitive.”

Bucky just shrugs. “Miss your family, or something?” He prods.

The commander gives in and snags another slice, then holds out a hand for the whipped cream canister, which Bucky gives up without a word. Jackson is silent as he covers the slice with laser focus, but as soon as he rolls it up, he starts speaking. “Yeah. I don’t get to visit a lot. We all have a lot of shit going on.” He takes a mournful bite. “I haven’t seen my cousins in a while.”

Bucky tilts his head. “You guys close? I never was, with mine. Most of them still lived in Romania.”

“Yeah, we’re really close. We all met when we were teenagers, but we went through a lot together, you know?” He shrugs. “I taught Hazel to falsify a Visa, Jason and I introduced Nico to Roblox, Thalia stitched my liver back together...” He sighed again.

Bucky, who had been alive for almost a century and had seen way too much, just nodded. “Yeah, I get it. Steve and I used to get into block fights together, then go and take turns with a frozen bag of peas.” He gnawed on the crust of his pizza. “He’s kind of a dick, now, but I miss him.”

“That sucks for you, but know that if I ever come into contact with Steve Rodgers, physical violence is my first option.”

“Noted.”

Jackson wiped a bit of whipped cream off his lower lip. Then, he checked his watch. “You going back to sleep anytime soon?”

Bucky takes his own look at the clock in the living room, peering around the corner. “Probably not.” He admits.

“Cool. I’m supposed to talk to you about something anyway.” He crams the last bit of his slice into his mouth, then hops off the counter. He shoves the cap onto the canister, and starts breaking down the now empty pizza box. Whipped cream back into the fridge, folded box into the trash, and he wipes his hands on the kitchen towel.

He then hefts himself back up onto the counter. The low lighting casts dark shadows across his face, dramatizing the circles under his eyes and the sharpness of his cheekbones. Jackson runs a hand through his dark hair, making it stick up. There’s a shot of gray hair, on his left side.

Jackson doesn’t beat around the bush. “The WSC wants you to testify.”

Bucky chokes on air. “What?”

“They want you to give your testimony. You’ve already been cleared, thanks to the evaluations you got in Wakanda, but since they got word of BARF, they’ve deemed you stable enough to testify.”

He slumps over. “About *what?*”

“A bit of everything, I think.” Jackson’s voice takes a gentler tone. “The investigation into Hydra infiltration is still ongoing. Even now, we’re still weeding people out. And none of them talk. They all just say the same thing. *Hail Hydra*, and that’s it. ” He relays, disgusted. Jackson rubs his temples. “Any sort of insider info would help. Like, any at all.”

Bucky gnaws on his lip. “In front of the entire council?”

Jackson looks up. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” He hurriedly assures. “It would help, but nobody is going to make you.”

“Could I just do it one on one with a representative? I’m not sure I want to be in front of all those cameras.”

Jackson nods easily. “If that’s what you want.”

For some reason, Bucky feels like he’s missing something, though. “Why do they want it so public?”

This brings a rueful smile from the other man. “To make a statement. Hydra’s prime weapon, now using everything they gave him against them.”

“On international television, for the entire world to see.” Bucky finishes. “One, big, *screw you to Hydra.*”

“That’s the idea,” Jackson confirms, a tad apologetic.

He didn’t want to go out in public like that. Being in rooms with a lot of people makes him twitchy,

even now. Being questioned by the entire WSC on film? Not his idea of a great time. But the idea of giving Hydra the metaphorical middle finger is *very* appealing.

“There’s one more thing,” Jackson adds before he can come to a decision. His face takes a pinched look, brow furrowing, lips going to a thin line. When he speaks, it’s careful, slow. “The general opinion of Enhanced people is...not great.”

At Bucky’s raised brow, he goes on. “It’s especially complicated for supersoldiers like you and Rogers. Some people think the Army committed a humanitarian crime for turning Rogers into something ‘inhuman’.” He says, using air quotes. “Others say he did his country a great service by being willing to ‘abandon his humanity’ to win the war. It’s a bigoted mess, honestly.”

Bucky swallows. “And me?” He asks, not sure if he actually wants the answer.

“Honestly?”

He nods.

“Well,” Jackson sighs, leaning back on his palms, “Most people think you’re a war hero. They don’t hate you for being the Winter Soldier, not after the whole brainwashing thing got out. People actually commended you for being able to break out of the conditioning. But...”

Of course there’s a *but*.

“Anti-Enhanced extremists think you’re a perfect example of what they’re fighting against. A good man, taken and turned into something horrible. Not the Winter Soldier, but an Enhanced. That’s the ultimate sin, to them.” Jackson takes a deep breath, then plunges into his next sentence. “The idea that Hydra wasn’t the thing that made you kill people, but rather your newly Enhanced status, instead, has been floating around for a while. Nobody really believes it, besides a few nutjobs.”

Right then and there, Bucky’s fist clenches so he hears the metal audibly creak and groan. “*What*?” He says lowly.

“Trust me, I know. It’s a crock of shit, but people are hateful. It’s just how it is, right now. And I’m so sorry a lot of it is focused on you.”

That startles Bucky a little, because Jackson does sound truly, really sorry. Like somehow, he thinks it's his fault. Which is completely ridiculous, of course.

More determined than ever, Bucky looks at him. "I'll do it. I'll testify. And I'll tell everyone just exactly what happened, what they did to me." His voice is hard, and Jackson's brows raise a little. But to his credit, he doesn't question Bucky, he just nods.

"I'll tell Hanover."

Percy goes back to his apartment and eventually falls asleep for a precious hour. But only an hour, because as soon as his head hits the pillow, he starts hearing voices and people screaming. Loud *bangs* that deafen him, the overwhelming panic and dread that fills his gut.

Then it's that same feeling, those same dreams, the Doctor running his hands over Percy, eyes cold and clinical. He cuts him open on that table, again and again and again, and Percy fades away.

He finds himself standing in the middle of nowhere, and there's a voice telling him everything will be alright, that he's safe, but the voice is *lying*.

Percy wakes up in his bed, Mrs. O'Leary sandwiched against him, and decides to go visit his mom. He'll check up on Lucas, spend some time with Estelle, chat a bit with Paul. It'll be nice.

He throws on jeans, an old shirt, and his jacket, leashes up Lea, and the two set out. On the way into the elevator, he asks FRIDAY to tell Tony that he'll be gone for an hour or two.

It's warm outside, the sun shining brightly overhead. Percy appreciates it—he gets less weird looks for wearing sunglasses. People walk by, occasionally cooing at Mrs. O'Leary. Nobody approaches him, though. Another bonus of the service animal vest.

When his mom sees him, she ushers him in.

“You’re working too hard,” She tuts, shaking her head. Percy ducks his head. “Sorry, mom. I’m trying to find time to visit more.”

She sighs, resting a hand on his shoulder. “I know, sweetie. I’m just worried about you. I always am.”

He tries his best to give her a convincing smile. “I’m doing fine, I swear. How’s Lucas?”

“Good. Really good. He has nightmares, and we’re doing our best to find a therapist. He likes coloring a lot, and Estelle adores him. She was *very* excited to have a little brother, even if he’s only a few months younger.”

Percy feels some of the tension bleed from his shoulders. “I’m glad.”

His mom leads him into Estelle’s bedroom, where the two are sitting on the floor, playing with a stack of blocks. “He’s already hooked on blue food, too.”

“Oh, thank the Gods.” Percy whispers back. Then, louder, he clears his throat. Both of the kids look up from their teetering tower, and give identical shrieks. They both scramble up and barrel towards him, jumping at the last minute. Percy stumbles back a bit, but catches them both.

“I missed you guys, too,” He laughs, switching to Portuguese.

“Percy! Percy, we got another brother!” Estelle babbles happily. *“He likes Ariel!”*

“Of course he does, Stella, he’s a smart kid.”

Lucas beams at him. *“Her tail is pretty.”*

Percy ruffles his hair, and Lucas sticks his tongue out at him.

He's coerced into sitting with the two of them and assisting in building a replica of a small castle. It falls down every time one of the kids gets too excited, but they just laugh and start to rebuild it. Mrs. O'Leary bothers Estelle until she smothers with kisses, and Lucas hesitantly gives her one on the snout, too.

After half an hour, his mom sticks her head in the door. "I'm making cookies," She announces, giving Percy a meaningful look, one that he doesn't have to see to understand. "And I'm looking for a helper."

Estelle's loud yell of, "Me! Pick Me!" covers Percy's soft sigh. Lucas doesn't volunteer himself, content next to Percy, and so his mother grabs Estelle by the armpits and they both go to the kitchen.

As soon as they leave, Lucas turns to Percy. "*Why does your dog wear a vest?*" He asks, blunt in the way only kids can be.

Percy runs a hand across Mrs. O'Leary's head. He doesn't bother trying to explain why she's registered as a service dog instead of a seeing eye dog—Lucas doesn't need to hear about Percy's web of lies he constructed to hide his disability and his powers in the same move.

"She helps lead me around." He says simply. *"Because I can't see that well."*

Lucas blinks. *"You can't see?"*

"Not really."

"But...how do you save people if you can't see them?"

The question doesn't bother Percy; he just shrugs. *"I have abilities that let me do things other people can't. I don't need to see, thanks to them."*

Lucas gasps. *"Like...like me? You're special?"*

Percy swallows. *"Yeah. Like you."*

The kid scooches even closer to him, eyes wide and eager. *“What do you do?”*

He leans in, and in an overdramatized whisper, says, *“Can you keep a secret?”*

Lucas nods so fast Percy’s a little scared he’ll get whiplash. Percy reaches up on the dresser and grabs the half-empty cup of water, probably abandoned by Estelle. With a twitch of his hand, it streams out of the cup, twisting into the shape of a wave in the air. *“Wow,”* Lucas whispers. *“I wish I could do that.”*

Percy laughs, returning the water to its cup. *“I’m sure whatever you do is just as cool.”* Lucas shrugs, shaking his head as he starts restacking the blocks. *“Not really. I can just hold my breath.”*

“I think that’s very cool, Lucas. I can do something like that, too. I get to spend a lot of time swimming.”

“They used to make me swim a lot. To see how long I could hold it. They made swimming sad.” Lucas looks up. *“Will you take me one day? I want to swim without them timing me.”*

Percy gives him a soft smile. *“Sure thing, kid. I’ll tell Mom you need a swimsuit. Maybe you can find an Ariel one.”*

Lucas lights up.

All in all, it’s a very good visit. His mom gives him a tupperware of freshly baked cookies to take back to the tower, and Estelle and Lucas both smother him with goodbye hugs.

Percy leaves feeling just a little lighter, a soft smile on his face. Mrs. O’Leary is similarly brightened, her steps bouncing on the concrete. It’s still bright and sunny out, warming his skin. He’d like to shed the layers he’s wearing, to strip off the flannel and tie it around his waist, but he can’t. He’s spent far too long trying to get by as far under the radar as possible to just have some passersbys ogle the scars criss crossing his arms while he walks his dog.

A consistent theme in his life; his good mood doesn’t last.

In fact, it is gone almost immediately, when he stops dead on a less-traveled path in the park. Mrs. O'Leary looks up at him questionably, but he doesn't respond. Lucas's haunted voice from a few weeks ago hits him.

"There... there were five of us. Marya was strong. They would make her pick up pieces of stone and...and rubble. Muiyang healed fast. They'd hurt him, sometimes. Just—just to see how much it worked. Ansh could make the wind. He was the smallest. And Ivan made things cold. He kept us from overheating, when we were in the boat. He was the last to...go."

Enhanced strength, picking up rubble. Accelerated healing. Wind, the cold.

And Lucas, who could survive underwater.

Oh, Gods. Percy was instantly overcome with the feeling of needing to vomit.

Every single one of those kids, the ones who had been taken, the ones who had *died*, had all had some facet of Percy's own abilities.

Chapter End Notes

bucky being scared shitless of percy and then just finding out this man is an absolute DISASTER

bucky: i was terrified of him for the longest time. then i realized that man over there has literally never had a cohesive thought in his life. if i could read said thoughts, they would be in comic sans.

yuhhh more angst for percy B) eat up, children

also bucky nerd rights!!!!

plumbing baby. goodbye.

When I Was Twelve

Chapter Summary

Percy was sitting on the couch, almost perfectly still. If not for the minute rising and falling of his chest, Tony would have thought he was a statue. And that was already so, very worrying because Percy Jackson was never still. He was tapping feet and drumming fingers and jogging legs. Not this.

Slowly, like approaching a wild animal, he inched towards the couch and sat down on the opposite end. “What happened?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sunday, July 27

5:34 PM

Stark Tower, NY

“Boss,” FRIDAY’s voice comes through the speakers, temporarily drowning out the music. Tony waits a second before responding; nanotech is a delicate, delicate thing, after all. “Yes?” He eventually calls.

“Commander Jackson has returned, and he seems...rather distressed.”

Getting Tony Stark out of his labs was one of the hardest tasks known to man. Many tried, many failed. So far, only four people had ever managed the task. One James Rhodes, the formidable Pepper Potts, user of extreme measures Percy Jackson, and Peter, who usually just pouted until he gave in.

But the point is, without one of those four people dragging him out, usually physically, Tony didn’t leave the lab when he was on an engineering binge. But when FRIDAY said that, he tossed down his tools and sprinted to the elevator.

“What’s going on? Where is he?” He barked out, jamming the elevator buttons to *close the damn door, already*.

“Currently, he is in his apartment. At the moment, I’m not quite sure what has caused this. He returned from a visit with his family five minutes ago, and his heart rate was severely elevated.”

Tony ran a hand through his hair. “Shit,” He muttered.

The elevator got to the residential floor with a pleasant *ding*, and Tony wasted no time in getting to Percy’s door. He knocked firmly, once, twice, then opened the door.

“Perce?” He called, stepping inside and softly shutting the door behind him. In an instant, Mrs. O’Leary was in front of him, grabbing the corner of his shirt in her mouth and tugging. He spluttered for a second, before realizing there was obviously a point to this. He wordlessly followed her into the living room, stopping at the edge of the carpet.

Percy was sitting on the couch, almost perfectly still. If not for the minute rising and falling of his chest, Tony would have thought he was a statue. And that was already so, *very* worrying because Percy Jackson was *never* still. He was tapping feet and drumming fingers and jogging legs. Not *this* .

Slowly, like approaching a wild animal, he inched towards the couch and sat down on the opposite end. “What happened?”

Percy’s head moved a little upwards at the question, but he ultimately didn’t say anything. Tony leaned back into the cushion and mentally prepared himself for the long haul. He didn’t take his gaze off of Percy, watching him out of the corner of his eyes.

He’d seen Percy happy, laughing so hard his shoulders shook and his eyes crinkled shut, seen him sad, when his face would seem to completely *fall* , and he’d seen him so angry that his voice was but a snarl, his hands trembling, but Tony had never, not once, seen him so *blank*.

Mrs. O’Leary paced back and forth on the carpet for a little bit, then eventually curled up in between their feet.

Ten minutes in, Percy found his voice. It was crackly and raw in the back of his throat, but he spoke anyway. “It all really started when I was twelve.”

Tony blinked, turning to face him fully. “What?”

“When I was twelve years old, on a summer beach trip, a monster from hell chased our car down and took my mother. I went to a camp, a safe haven for demigods. There was a quest that was issued, to retrieve Zeus’s stolen Master Bolt and prevent World War Three. I went with my two friends, but I didn’t really give a shit about the Bolt. I was going to get my mother back.”

Alright, there was a lot going on in that statement, but the first thing that stuck out to Tony was that they sent a fucking *twelve year old* to stop the third World War? He deeply wanted to scream and throw something, but Percy seemed to really need to get this off his chest, and Tony was gonna sit this through all the way, no matter how much he wanted to commit some astoundingly violent acts.

“Turns out, the Bolt wasn’t stolen by Hades, like we’d thought. It was one of our own. He...He wanted to raise the Titans, to overthrow Olympus. He was bitter. And, rightfully so. We all trusted him, and he tried to kill me. I didn’t find out why until later.” As he spoke, Percy’s posture deflated, sinking into the couch. Tony wanted to speak up, but the moment was too fragile. He was afraid Percy might stop if he interrupted.

“There was a prophecy, that I was supposed to make a choice on my sixteenth birthday, that would either save or condemn us all. I got thrust into this world and everyone’s safety got shoved on my shoulders. And I tried. I tried—” His voice cracked. “ *So fucking hard, Tony,*”

Slowly, the engineer scooped over on the couch, and wrapped an arm around Percy’s shoulders. The demigod didn’t hesitate, leaning into him.

“I wasn’t good enough. So many people died. My friends,” He choked off, swallowing. “But we won. And I guess that’s all that really mattered, huh?” Percy’s voice was bitter, so bitter, unlike Tony had ever heard before.

“And I thought it was all over, that people had stopped dying because of me.” He ran a hand over his face. “Gods,” he bit out. “How could I have been so *stupid?*”

“You’re not stupid, Percy.” Tony chided softly. Percy just shook his head, biting down on his lip.

“But I am, because it turns out I was wrong, because all those mutant kids that died all had powers like mine. Every single one of them was hunted down by Hydra because of me, because of what

they saw me do, and now they're all dead. And it's all my *fucking* fault." Percy was shaking, his fists clenched so hard his knuckles were white.

"Percy," The words were torn out of Tony. Christ, he knew Percy's childhood hadn't been all sunshine and ponies, but what the actual *hell*? "I cannot think of a single way that would be your fault, and I'm a damn smart guy." Tony shrugged modestly. "Thinking is kind of my thing."

Percy's lips twitched up slightly at that, but his eyes were still damp and his lip was bloody, he had been chewing on it so hard. Tony rubbed his hand up and down his arm in a steady, soothing motion. Internally, though, he was red hot with rage.

Tony Stark was a deeply flawed man. He knew this. But even he, for all his sins, had never hurt a kid. One of his biggest regrets in the world was that Peter, at the tender age of 14, had felt the world was so corrupted he needed to don a mask and start fighting crime. Tony had tried to stop him, tried so damn hard, but he knew he couldn't. Peter was the type that would help as long as he could, and all Tony could do was be there to catch him when he fell.

But to purposely put a kid, a twelve year old, in that kind of world, with those kinds of expectations? Fuck, no wonder Percy tried, *needed*, so hard to save everyone, it's what had been expected of him, had been *demand*ed of him, ever since he was a kid.

"Was it...was it that bad?" Tony found himself asking. Internally, he begged he was wrong, that somehow he had misunderstood, that these all powerful beings, these immortal Gods, weren't so cruel.

Percy blinked heavily. "When I was fifteen, I tossed myself into the River Styx to try and receive the curse of Achilles so we had a shot at winning a war against an army of immortal monsters and Titans." He turned a little, burying half his face in Tony's shirt, who wasted no time in soothingly sweeping the hair out of his face.

"I saw the ghost of Achilles on the bank. He told me that whatever I thought I needed, the curse wasn't worth it. That it would strip me away from my humanity. I told him I had no other choice. And I asked for advice. I asked how to win," Percy took in a slow breath. "You wanna know what he told me?"

Tony closed his eyes tightly. "What did he say?"

Percy wet his lips. “He said he won by being the worst of all of them. He said ‘ *It’s not worth it. Die quick and clean. They’ll kill you like an animal but you’ll die a human being.* ’” He laughed. It was a harsh, bitter sound, and Tony resisted the urge to flinch. “The Greeks won the Trojan war, but everyone forgets how.”

A long beat of horrified silence. Tony could do nothing but stare, mouth agape, aghast. “...Jesus fucking Christ,” He breathed. His grip on Percy tightening imperceptibly, offering what little protection he could. “Percy, I’m...I’m so sorry,” He choked out.

The demigod just shook his head, leaning further into Tony. “It’s a lot of peoples' fault, Tony. But it’s not yours.”

“Still,” He said weakly. Then, a sudden thought came to him, making his brow furrow and his mouth twist downwards. “Are there a lot of other demigods?”

Percy silently shook his head. He weighed his words for a moment. “No. Greek ones, at least... There’s about seventy, in total.”

Tony...wasn’t even going to touch the hypothetical that there were other types of demigods out there. He already had Thor and Percy. He didn’t need any more. “The Gods don't have kids often, then?” He said, with the tiniest touch of relief.

“Oh, no.” Percy said bleakly. “Gods have no self control. They have kids all the time.”

“O...okay...”

Percy’s face is perfectly neutral, in a wispy, distant way. “Demigods die.” He said quietly. “Monsters don’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“Demigods die for good. Monsters come back. Always.” He shook his head. “They track us by scent and hunt us down like prey. My first monster came after me when I was still in a crib.” Then, his face took on the saddest smile Tony had ever seen. “Poseidon has been having demigod children since humans existed. I’m the first of them to ever make it past eighteen.”

Tony couldn't even take time to relish in the fact that his hypothesis about Percy's parentage was close. All he could focus on was the horrible picture he had painted about his early life, about how demigods lived.

Percy seemed to pick up on his thoughts. "We make do." He said softly.

"You shouldn't *have* to."

"I know." Percy shook his head. "But we do."

He closed his eyes again, leaning back against the couch. Percy sighed against his collar. Tony looked down at him. "What now?"

"Now? I need to get to the bottom of this. These kids are being murdered because of what Hydra saw me do, and nobody cares. We're the only people looking into this, did you know that?"

"No. No, I didn't."

"Yeah, well, that's our government for you. " Percy makes a disgusted noise in the back of his throat. "I...Gods, Tony. I keep telling Lucas to embrace his abilities, to not be afraid of who he is, but how the hell can he do that when *I* can't?"

"Percy..."

"No, Tony. I just," He makes a frustrated noise. "I'm a fucking hypocrite."

There's not much input Tony can offer, here. While he's an empathetic person, he has no idea what Percy is going through. Instead, he tries to offer his support any way he can.

"I'll help you do some digging." He says. "Fri needs an excuse to stretch her servers, anyway."

Percy lifts his head and gives him a smile. It's duller than usual, lacking a certain something, but it's a smile. "I appreciate that." Then, he paused. "I, uh, called in a favor earlier. If some crazy guy wearing red shows up, just send him my way."

Tony squints. "I'm not sure I like the sound of that."

Instead of reassuring him, Percy just shrugs. "Wait 'till you actually meet the guy."

Sunday, July 27

8:39 PM

Wakandan Royal Palace, Wakanda

Clint peered over her shoulder, eyebrows raised. "Got a letter back?"

Natasha nodded absently, reading it over for the fourth time in as many minutes. She tilted it to the side so Clint could read it as well. It's dated almost ten days ago.

First BARF session was today. No complications. We'll see how it goes.

Yes, it's true. It's called SWORD. Why?

Barnes says hello, by the way.

-PJ

The archer hummed. "A new agency, huh?" He squinted at the last line of writing. "You believe him about Barnes?"

Did she? Jackson had proven himself an honest man, sure. But honest people were always the ones you had to watch out for. To her, it was simple. Natasha was a liar. She had been raised to deceive

and hurt people, she was surrounded by people whose sole purpose was to do the same. From a young age, she understood that whatever someone told you, you needed proof. Never what they gave you, either. Always find your own.

It's people who always told the truth were the ones to blindsides you. You never knew when an honest person would try to pull the wool over your eyes. Not until it was too late, at least. And Jackson was as genuine as a spy could afford to be.

She knew, though, that the only reason Jackson would lie about this is if Stark asked him to. And Natasha was a big enough person to admit when she had been so, very wrong.

Stark would never hurt Barnes. He would never lie to him and Shuri about wanting to help him, and then turn around and kill him as soon as he relaxed.

Now that she thought about it, that sounded a lot more like something Natasha would do. And God, was that a horrible thought.

"I think so," Nat eventually said.

A beat of hesitation. "Should we tell Steve?" Clint asked, looking unsure.

Natasha pursed her lips, and folded the letter back up. Barnes and Steve had been through hell, more or less together. She assumed, once they got to Wakanda's safety, the two would get on the path to becoming the dynamic duo they once were.

Once again, Natasha had been wrong.

Barnes was different. Steve was different.

How much, she was unsure. But it was enough.

"He didn't ask us to." She settled on. "We can check, for next time."

Clint nodded. “I guess. I’m just...I’m worried about him, y’know? Steve.” He clarified.

A fair sentiment. Steve had been rather...mopey, lately. Despite how deep in the wrong he was, Natasha still felt a little bad for him. It was hard not to when he seemed so wrecked. But, until he pulled his head out of his ass, there wasn’t much she could do about it, despite how much she itched to.

Instead, she lightly bumped Clint’s shoulder and picked up a pen, already debating on what to write back.

Sunday, July 27

10:27 PM

Stark Tower, NY

They pulled SWORD into it, too. Well, all the members that were awake, at least.

Bridgette and Lee showed up at the same time, both looking alert despite the miasma of fatigue surrounding them. Aspen followed, not even fifteen minutes later, lacking the newfound look of interrupted sleep the other two had. Well, that might just be because Aspen always looked a little tired.

FRIDAY ushered them all into the elevator, promising various caffeinated drinks from wherever they wanted, on Tony’s orders.

The three stumbled out of the elevator and twisted and turned down a few hallways under the direction of FRIDAY. Eventually, they reached a back room, the kind that was probably built to be a small storage area.

Aspen looked around, then sighed and dropped down into a chair, leveling Tony with an indecipherable look. “DynaPep.” They said suddenly. Tony raised a brow. “Excuse me?”

“My price. DynaPep. Ever heard of them?”

“Can’t say I have.”

A tut. “Unfortunate.”

Gods, Percy had such weird taste in employees. Bridgette and Lee shared a look, then took the two seats next to Aspen. Percy silently waved to them, then went back to his reading. Tony gave Aspen a long look, then pulled out his phone.

A quick Google search later, he made a choked noise. “714.3?”

Percy slowly lifted his head. “What?”

“714.3 milligrams of caffeine per fluid ounce. DynaPep. The stuff of Gods.” Aspen said in a monotone. Tony looked to the side at Percy, who was carefully silent.

Bridgette’s head snapped towards them. “*Aspen*, ” She whispered, horrified. The security operative just shrugged.

Tony raised a brow. “You sure?”

Aspen leaned in. “Do I look like someone who’s fucking around, here?”

Tony held his hands up in surrender. “What flavor?”

“One cinnamon, one mint. It burns a little in opposite ways.” Their eyes gleam. “It tastes positively *radioactive* .”

“...You got it.”

Percy snorted softly. “I’m honestly surprised you haven’t tried those before.”

“Hey, I do have some semblance of self-preservation. I have a heart condition, you know.” He tapped the arc reactor twice. Then, too quiet for anyone to hear, “And those came out after I was already hooked on coffee.”

Tony gestured to FRIDAY to add Aspen’s request to the list. “Lehey? Van Keppel?”

Bridgette shook her head. “No thanks. We got coffee on the way here. If I need to kick my heart rate up even more, I’ll just have Lee text me that ‘ *we need to talk* .’”

“...Alright. And you?”

Lee, who’d already been pouring over bank statements from some suspicious officials for a good five minutes, blinked. “If you think my heart rate is capable of fluctuating a single beat, you are a fool.”

Gods, *such* weird taste in employees. “That’s it, I guess, Fri.”

FRIDAY made a humming noise, then gave the affirmative. “Your orders will be delivered in approximately twelve minutes.” A beat. “I requested our courier to speed.”

“Much appreciated.”

Silence lapses over them. The three newcomers work well together, Tony notes. Lee reads the fastest, skimming over documents. He flags them, and hands them to Bridgette. She reads over them, decides how relevant they are, and then organizes them into piles centered around the same theory for Aspen to read over. When they find something solid, they or FRIDAY either read it aloud or get a braille copy. It’s remarkably efficient.

Not a single complaint is uttered about having to make trips to the braille printer nor repeating certain lines. Lee, who’s the closest, just taps Percy on the arm. He takes off his headphones, through which FRIDAY is reading the paper in his hands, and listens.

Good. Tony had faith Percy’s instincts around whether or not to trust people, but it was still nice to see that his friend was being treated right.

In the end, though, it's Tony who finds something.

His eyes widen, he takes a sharp intake of breath. Percy looks up before he even speaks, probably able to feel his heart rate through the *floor* or some shit. Was that a Poseidon thing? Could it be? Tony had no clue.

"Er," He says, to catch the attention of all the (debatably) normal people. In a disquieting synchronicity, the three look up at him. He waves the paper. "You guys were talking about a Project Integrity earlier, right?"

Suddenly, he feels like he's holding a cut of steak surrounded by starving hounds. "Yes, yes we were!" Aspen leans forward. At this point, they've long since downed both the DynaPeps, and Tony is fairly sure they're vibrating at frequencies only audible to bats.

"Well, it isn't much, but..." He looks down at the page. "Half a million was withdrawn directly from the United States Department of the Treasury. The only thing cited here is that it went to Project Integrity."

Percy leans in. "When?" He says, tone urgent.

"Uh, September first of last year. Does that mean anything to you?"

Aspen, Lee, and Bridgette all frown, but ultimately shake their heads. "Nothing relevant." Bridgette says.

Tony turns to Percy, expecting more of the same. But the demigod is leaned back in his chair, eyebrows deeply furrowed. "You know, when people want someone dead, they usually prefer it sooner rather than later."

"I am aware of the fact, yes." Tony agrees. He's learned, by this point, to just go along with whatever Percy is on.

"And when they *hire* someone to ensure their enemy's tragic fate, it's usually within a couple days. No more than a week. They're always impatient." He shakes his head.

Bridgette looks slightly disturbed at the intimate knowledge. She looks to Lee, who just pops his gum and offers nothing.

Percy pays them no mind. “Within a couple days.” He repeats. “Tony. What happened on September third, last year?”

The realization is painted with a thick coat of undiluted dread. “No,” He breathes out. “You don’t think...”

Aspen waves a hand in the air. “Care to clue us newbies in?”

Tony swallows, tensing at even the thought of it. Though they’re all looking at Tony, Percy takes pity on him and answers in his stead. “It’s when I did a very convincing swiss cheese impression on live television.”

Bridgette chokes. “The Maria Stark Foundation gala?”

“That’s the one.”

“That was *you*?”

Percy waves a hand. “Yes.” He says impatiently. “But, half a million? That right there,” he taps the paper, “is the price of a human life.” He swivels in his chair towards Tony. “Specifically, a very important life.”

“Wait, Stark was the one who was supposed to die?”

Tony rubbed a hand down his face. “First off, I can’t believe I’m only worth half a million. Second, yes, it was supposed to be me. Percy pushed me out of the way.”

“Damn,” Aspen whistled.

Percy pats him on the shoulder. “If it helps, I would have charged at least two million.” He consoles.

“That...actually does help, thanks.”

Bridgette slumps forward on the table. Lee puts a gentle hand on her back; Tony raises a brow, but chooses not to comment. “So,” She groans. “Now we have to find the guy who tried to kill Stark and almost *did* kill Jackson?”

“No need. I found him last October. Dueled to the death in a basement after he tried to blow us all up.”

Lee silently fistbumps him. Bridgette makes a stressed noise.

So. Somebody has been stealing money from a government project that may or may not actually exist, and they used said money to hire Rumlow to kill Tony. but he shot Percy instead, and fled. To a Hydra base, where people kept saying *Hail Hydra, for the new world order*. Ominous as shit, but whatever.

And now the SWORD team was taking naps in the common room, and he and Percy silently sat across from each other, each lost in thought.

“Hey,” Percy says suddenly. “When you tapped your chest, what was that noise?”

“What?”

“Earlier. You said you had heart problems, and you tapped your chest. It made a weird noise.” He tilted his head. “I could always feel something in your heart. Like, *in* it, but I figured it would be rude to ask.”

Tony raises a brow. Percy shrugs. “Hey, I confided in you about my traumatic childhood. Now I want to know about the fuzzy thing in your chest.”

It makes sense that Percy wouldn't know about it, Tony supposes. It's still a shock, though. He hadn't considered that, without the faint light of it shining through his shirts, it wouldn't be glaringly obvious.

"Fair. It's a— wait, fuzzy?"

"Yeah. It, like, buzzes. Just a little." He makes a vague gesture. "Fuzzy."

"Okay. *Fuzzy*. It's only an arc reactor that's decades ahead of any other clean energy tech we have, but sure. It's fuzzy. It also powers an electromagnet that keeps shrapnel from entering my heart."

"Huh." And that's the thing Tony loves about Percy. You could say the wildest shit to him, and he just nods and takes it in stride.

"I built it in a cave."

"Nice job on that."

"Thanks. Question for a question?" Tony proposes.

Percy's jaw cracks in a yawn, but he nods anyway. "Fire away,"

Tony leans in, eyes gleaming. "You have powers, right? Are they all specific to your parentage, or are there some standard enhancements? Are there physical differences between demigods and baseline humans?" The words tumble out of him, pacing long forgotten in a bout of curiosity.

He receives an indulgent smile. "Yes, I have powers. It's hard to say, about the standard enhancements. There...aren't usually a lot of demigods around for a proper study. When there are, we aren't typically focused on doing tests. Speed, strength, durability, and enhanced reflexes are all present in some form." He lists off.

“It fluctuates?”

Percy shrugs. “Sure. Hermes kids are always much faster than Ares kids, who are always stronger. But both are above human averages in all categories.” He explains.

“And you?”

The demigod pauses, thinking for a moment. Tony wishes badly he was taking notes. “Physical...” He starts. “Well, first you have to understand that I’m a Big Three kid.”

“Big Three?” He echoes.

“Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades. Kronos’s three sons. The most powerful Gods. Consequently, their kids are the most Godly. But, it comes with a price. Our scents, how monsters track us, is much, *much* stronger than any other demigod’s.”

Tony holds back an internal wince. Percy just says it so *casually*.

“Think of it like this. The skies; built to live up high, lightweight and airy. The underworld; built to live in the shadows, wispy, like ghosts. For example, my cousins, Thalia and Jason, and Zeus-Jupiter kids. Their bones are lighter, so they can fly. They need less oxygen, built for high altitudes. Nico and Hazel, Hades-Pluto kids, are quieter. Their actual *heartbeats* are quieter than normal. I can barely hear them. Sometimes, they can be standing right in front of you, and you just don’t notice them. Like they’re ghosts. They don’t need Vitamin D to survive, either.” His lips twitch upwards. “They’re also really short. Thalia says it’s to prepare them for living in cramped tunnels and caves, but we don’t repeat that unless we want to get bitten by Nico.”

“What about you?”

“If the skies are free, the underworld intangible, the seas are...steady. It’s a little different for me, too. While the other Big Three kids are just built to suit their powers and represent their domain, my traits are from an actual race of beings. Atlanteans.”

“Wait, wait, *wait*. Atlantis? Are you shitting me?”

Percy grins. "Me? Never."

Tony resolves to question him about that later, and waves a hand for him to continue, which he does.

"I'm made to withstand thousands of tonnes of water pressure, to be able to stay standing in the wildest of storms and the largest of earthquakes. Ideally, I'm supposed to fight underwater, in my element. But when I don't, when I'm on land, I'm stronger and faster than normal."

"Because you're built to be swinging a sword around through water," Tony finishes. The effort alone sounds tiring.

"Exactly. I'm denser than a normal person, too, but that doesn't stop me from being faster than a lot of the others. I can breathe underwater, too, obviously, even though I don't have any sort of gills."

"*Fascinating* ." Tony can't help but breath out. Percy's eyes crinkle at the corners. "So, strong, fast, durable. What else, beyond the physical?"

Percy's eyes take on a mischievous glint. "Water. I can make it do pretty much anything. Move it, freeze it, heat it up. I can cause storms, earthquakes if I try hard enough. My hearing is pretty good, but my nose is better. Basic stuff."

"That's not *basic* at all, but continue. How do you compensate for your vision?"

"Also water." Percy says plainly. Tony gives him a blank look.

"Think about it. There's water in absolutely everything living. I can feel it. I know where it is, how much of it there is, how it takes its shape. The water in the atmosphere gives me an impression of physical surroundings. And 'cause of the whole *Earthshaker* thing, when stuff moves, they create tiny vibrations I can pick up on. Add that to my nose and my ears, and I get a pretty good idea of what's going on."

"That's...that's amazing. How did you learn to do that?"

And then, Percy's face took on a look completely foreign to Tony. Well, foreign on Percy's face, at least. He recognized it all too well; it had been reflected back at him in the mirror since Afghanistan. The glazed over eyes, the slackening of the mouth, the minute tightening of the shoulders.

With one question, Percy Jackson looked absolutely *haunted*.

"I adapted."

Chapter End Notes

percy: bare minimum about his childhood
tony: *enraged father noises*

pov me making shit up about demigods: (🍷 🍷)

dynapep is real, by the way. drink it to see god.

in case you were wondering, i found that 'quote' from achilles on pinterest. i have no idea where the fuck it came from or what the context was. the background was orange and it was in comic sans

happy early easter and late passover to all that celebrate!

plumbing baby. goodbye

...It Would Be Fine

Chapter Summary

They file into two large SUVs, both identical down to the tinted windows. Bucky is directed to the first one, along with Stark, Jackson, Echo, and Wraith. A man Stark introduces as Happy hops in the driver's seat, while Jackson takes the passenger. He and Stark take the middle row, and the two SWORD agents take the very back row.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tuesday, July 29

4:54 PM

Stark Tower, NY

After talking it over with Bucky and Hanover, they agreed the hearing should happen as soon as possible. Tony had provided their estimated BARF schedule to work around; it had been bumped up to every week instead of every other due to the lack of negative reaction.

It was set for next Tuesday, a few days after the BARF session on Saturday. One week to prep Bucky on everything they were going to ask him.

Tony ran a hand through his hair with a sigh.

Gods, being a person with responsibility was *exhausting*. Normally, Pepper would give him a hand in taking care of all this, but she had been working *very* hard recently and she deserved every second of free time she had.

From his spot across the table, Percy made an aggravated noise, thunking his forehead on the table. "I should've stayed in the Wolf House."

Tony was simply too tired to ask. "Just...take this." He stands up and shoves a stack of papers towards Percy. "I'm going to get a cup of coffee."

As he walks away, he doesn't notice Percy's wide eyed expression.

Saturday, August 2

1:25 PM

Stark Tower, NY

They start the session a little later than Percy would have liked; Peter's coming over in less than an hour. Of course, FRIDAY will do her best, which is always perfect, to keep the two from meeting, but still. Percy has never been a fan of cutting it close.

He doesn't think Bucky would want to hurt Peter; it's simply too far out of character for the man. But BARF always puts him on edge, and Tony would probably fry whoever hurt a single hair on Peter's head.

Besides, Bucky doesn't need to know some things. He shouldn't really.

Just in case.

It's the same setup as last time, only without Shuri. Tony had asked if he wanted her there again, but Bucky had just shaken his head. "It's fine," He'd said, leaving no room for argument. Tony had looked at him, searching, for a minute and then started setting up the equipment.

Percy stood a ways back, scrutinizing every single move. It was clear *something* had happened between the two while he was out working last week. Whatever it was, it was something good.

There was a definite lack of tension in both their shoulders, less nervous shifting and hesitant voices.

And while Tony most assuredly did something vaguely stupid, Percy approved, whatever happened.

He leaned against the wall, tipping his head back, closing his eyes after the intensity of the lights above caused spots to dance across his vision. Gods above, Tony must have been working quite late if they were this bright. He tended to do that, sometimes—he claimed the lights' harshness helped keep him awake.

Personally, Percy thought it was a crock of shit, but he drank less coffee because of it, so he wasn't going to say anything.

He tuned back in as Tony started the session; the familiar sensations of the engineer getting to work was something that always intrigued him. Whether it was one of his cars, suits, or other assorted projects, Tony was always happiest when he was working. Pepper had agreed with him, laughing. "Sometimes, I think he's happier to see the lab than me," She joked.

And while Percy was sure there were some facial expressions he was missing, he knew to look beyond that. It was almost funny, how quickly Tony's blood pressure lessened, how his muscles relaxed when he started working.

Though, Percy didn't pay much attention to blood pressure and the like these days. It wasn't bloodbending, but it was close—reaching out and running his metaphorical fingers across it, but not grabbing it—but it was enough to make him queasy.

When the session started, Percy settled in to listen to James's heartbeat. It started out calm; the man had one of the steadiest heartbeats Percy had ever heard. Listening to it slowly kick up was something that made his brow furrow, but he said nothing.

He didn't tap out like last time. Tony ended the session after a bit, humming at the results.

"How was it?" Was all the engineer prodded, the familiar sounds of him tapping on his tablet filling the room.

Bucky shrugged. "Fine. Better."

"Better?"

"Saw...different stuff."

“Ah.”

That certainly explained the lack of cardiovascular event that last time had finished off with. A part of Percy wondered just what he'd seen, what had scared him so much, but his logical side shoved those questions down. He wasn't supposed to get close to James; it wouldn't do either of them any favors.

Just in case.

But Percy, for all his secrecy and avoidance, was never able to turn someone away who needed his help. He made vows, promised himself he would try to stay away from the man as much as possible, but in truth, he knew his whole plan was thrown out the window the moment he heard the pure confusion in James's voice when Percy did the bare minimum for him.

And now, he was going to keep a metaphorical eye on the man for an hour or two, make him lunch, and get him some water.

Gods fucking damnit.

There was something extremely strange about Commander Jackson. It was no wonder he and Romanoff struck up a tenuous friendship; they both went around being kind in the strangest ways.

Jackson was somehow aggressively making him soup, and Romanoff snuck chocolate and sweets to his room and then disappeared like a strange Russian Easter Bunny.

Speaking of which—

“Hey, Jackson?”

The man tilted his head, indicating he was listening.

“The next time you write Romanoff, could you tell her I said thanks for the cupcake? She’ll know what I mean.”

Jackson stirred the simmering soup, then placed the pot’s lid atop it. He turned around, leaning his back against the edge of the counter. “Sure thing.” He agreed easily.

Bucky gave him a small smile. “Thanks.”

He received a nod in return. Jackson opened his mouth, closed it, then abruptly turned around. The supersoldier frowned slightly, noting the tenseness in his shoulders.

The same tightness was evident in his face when he emerged from the kitchen with a steaming bowl of soup, glass of water, and a ripe clementine. Bucky thanked him once more, subdued. He plucked the orange from the table, rolling it in between his fingers.

Jackson sat down without saying a word, opening his laptop and putting a single earbud in, letting the other dangle off the side of the keyboard.

Bucky looked back down at his hand. It was perfectly ripe, he noted as he began to peel it. Where he found a ripe clementine in the middle of the summer, Bucky had no clue. Maybe that was a more common thing, nowadays.

Would it be out of place to ask? The commander seemed awfully closed off—they’d had three conversations so far, if you could call them that, and he was curt and short in all of them, midnight pizza-whipped-cream notwithstanding. Though Bucky was prepared to write that one off as extreme sleep deprivation.

Then, something that had never occurred to him lit up like a light bulb. Had he...done something to Jackson? It’s not like he would remember. The man used to be a SHIELD agent, which left many possibilities. Even as a civilian, Bucky couldn’t rule it out. He knew he had hurt a lot of people, and only remembered a small fraction.

It’d explain the wariness, the guarded looks and the slight frown he had whenever they were in the same room. Despite it all, Jackson helped him, but...well, orders are orders, regardless of personal opinions.

He found himself unable to think of anything else, wracking his brain for any past memories of the man as he ate. By the end of it, though, he had scraped up nothing but his own frustration.

When he set the bowl down, it was with a tad more force than he intended. Jackson raised a brow, momentarily looking up at him.

Bucky sighed, rubbing a hand down his face. "Sorry," He muttered. "Didn't mean to do that."

Jackson just nodded once and returned to his typing.

Bucky bit his lip, looked down, then back up at him. "Have I done something?"

"Excuse me?"

"I, just...Did I do something wrong to you?"

He must've struck a nerve. Jackson leans back, taking out the earbud and closing the computer. He sets it on the coffee table, and lets out a slow breath. The commander looks at Bucky for a long few minutes, and he resists the urge to squirm.

Finally, Jackson's face twists into a bittersweet smile. "No," He says softly. "You didn't do anything wrong, James."

"Oh," Bucky trailed off, because if he didn't do anything to the man, that just meant he plain out didn't like him.

Jackson leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "I'm..." He paused, working the words around in his mouth. "I'm sorry. I just...There are some things I don't want to risk, because Gods, honestly, I don't think I could handle it."

Bucky's brow took on a severe furrow. The way Jackson said that held a sort of weariness that he'd last heard when he was back in the war, men with grime-streaked faces and empty eyes. "Handle what?"

In lieu of answer, Jackson just tightly closed his eyes, rubbing a thumb across his forehead.

Bucky didn't quite feel comfortable probing Jackson for more answers; there was something clearly personal going on there.

But there was still a distant, nagging sensation in the back of his mind. So, he did the next best thing. He went to Tony.

"Do you have a moment?" Bucky called from the doorway.

Tony didn't look up, but waved him in. As he made his way over to the worktable, he noted Stark was working under something that looked almost like a microscope, his eyes pressed to it, his hands working under the lens.

"Everything all right?" He asked, looking up at Bucky.

"Yeah, it's just..." He huffed, leaning a hip against the edge of the table. "I'm worried about Jackson."

Something flashed in Tony's eyes. "What happened?"

"Nothing serious, we just talked. I asked him if I had done something to him, and that's why he was..." Bucky shifted. "Closed off." He settled on.

Tony chewed the inside of his cheek. "What'd he say?"

Bucky relayed the words almost verbatim. Tony pursed his lips, absorbing them, then set down his tools. He gestured to another chair a few feet away. "Pull up a seat," He invited.

Once Bucky was sitting, Tony turned in his seat to face him. "Percy's...been through some stuff

recently. He lost somebody a bit ago, and it was far from the first time.” He spoke carefully, choosing every word. “And, of course, he doesn’t want something like that to happen again. So he’s doing his best to...avoid it.”

Never let it be said Bucky couldn’t read in between the lines. “He...he doesn’t want to get close to me in case something happens to me?”

Tony didn’t offer verbal confirmation, but the look on his face was all Bucky needed.

Eventually, he did say, “The thing about Percy,” He said, fidgeting with the sleeve of his shirt, “Is that he cares. A lot. Way too much, for someone in his line of work. He may look all tough, but he’s got a heart three sizes too big for his chest. And you can only get hurt so many times before you just...” Tony made a loose gesture. “Try to avoid forming attachments in the first place.”

In a devastating sort of manner, that made sense to Bucky. Lord knows when he first came out of cryo, he barely talked to anyone. Though his reasons were a tad different; he wasn’t scared of losing them—he was terrified of being the one to hurt them. It’d been months before he actually began to talk to Shuri in earnest, instead of just quietly answering her questions.

Bucky crossed his arms, a frown tugging at his lips. “But...is he alright?”

Tony looked up at him once more. “Eventually, I think so.”

Tuesday, August 5

7:58 AM

Stark Tower, NY

It’s the morning of his testimony, and Bucky has been up for hours. Tony comes to grab him a long while before they are supposed to leave, dragging him out of his apartment down to the communal living room the floor below.

Now, Bucky was always vaguely unsure of what to do around Tony Stark, but probably the last thing he expected was that the couches would be occupied by six people in various stages of

consciousness.

Directly to his left, occupying the armchair and balancing a laptop on his knee, was a young man, shaggy dark hair pulled into a small tail at the back of his neck. He was gesturing wildly with his hands as he spoke to the person next to him, a short blond who looked half asleep.

On the long couch, a woman with rich brown skin and meticulously braided hip-length hair had sneaker-clad feet propped up on the coffee table, scrolling through her phone. Next to her, a guy in clunky combat boots and choppy cut hair was laying with his knees looped over the back of the couch, hanging upside down. And finally, all the way on his right, on the loveseat, a woman with caramel colored hair was talking to a person with ashy blonde hair and a flat expression.

Tony clapped his hands together, drawing all their attention. “Everyone, this is Barnes. Barnes, this is SWORD—they’ll be handling your security detail for today.” Starting on the left with the computer guy, he introduced them. “This is Ace, Wraith, Tremor, Foxglove, Archangel, and Echo.” He went in a circle, ending with the blonde.

Bucky had never heard of *SWORD* before, but, then again, there are many things that are new to him.

Each of them offered up some sort of greeting, whether it be a wave, smile, or nod, sans Wraith, who Bucky was now completely sure was asleep.

He gave them a slight smile back. After a beat, the one Tony introduced as Echo spoke up. “Alright, Jackson’s fairly busy, so, I’ll be briefing you.” He stands up, and gestures for Bucky to follow him over to the table. On top of it, a large map is set. “This,” Echo says, gesturing loosely to the paper, “Is the WSC chamber. Jackson’s the one who’ll be keeping an eye on you, and the rest of us will be stationed around the area, in addition to the other guards.” He levels his gaze at Bucky. His eyes are such a pale shade of gray they look clear. “If something happens, and you can’t find Jackson, you find me, understood?”

Bucky nods once. “Loud and clear.”

Echo gives a satisfied nod, and bends down over the paper to begin outlining all their emergency exit strategies for him.

They talk for a good thirty minutes before Tony whisks him away once more. Bucky stands, stunned, as Stark shoves a drycleaner’s bag into his chest. “Go get dressed.”

At Bucky's resulting brow raise, the man rolls his eyes. "You're not showing up to the WSC chamber in *jeans*, Barnes. For Gods sake. Go get changed."

The suit fits perfectly, because of course it does. At this point, Bucky's not even weirded out.

When he returns to the common room, Foxglove gives a loud wolf whistle, to which he rolls his eyes. Jackson is here now, too, quietly talking to Echo. They're all dressed as well, now, in various combinations of dress shirts, slacks, blouses and pencil skirts, security passes pinned to their chests. Oddly enough, none of them carry any sort of visible badge.

Stark checks his watch. "We should go," He announces. One by one, everyone files into the elevator. Right before Jackson enters, Stark catches his wrist and quickly adjusts his tie. The man rolls his eyes, but thanks him nonetheless.

FRIDAY takes the elevator down, past the lobby, to a floor Bucky didn't even know existed. When the doors open, it's to a spacious underground garage. A nice one, too—the concrete is smooth and unmarred, and the lights are evenly spaced and just bright enough to give everything a modern shine to it. To one side, a line of cars that probably cost more than anything Bucky has ever owned sits. All types he's heard of, he notes.

But on the other side, there's clusters of half assembled shells, engines that look like they've been ripped apart, random pieces scattered across the floor. There's even a motorcycle in the corner, leaned up against the wall. A helmet lays next to it, discarded.

They walk down in between the two rows to the far end, where the cars are waiting for them.

They file into two large SUVs, both identical down to the tinted windows. Bucky is directed to the first one, along with Stark, Jackson, Echo, and Wraith. A man Stark introduces as Happy hops in the driver's seat, while Jackson takes the passenger. He and Stark take the middle row, and the two SWORD agents take the very back row.

Happy peels out of the underground garage, the other car right on their tail.

Bucky resists the urge to shift, clenching and unclenching his fist. Stark looks at him out of the corner of his eye. "Hey," The man murmurs reassuringly. "It'll be fine. No need to worry."

Bucky swallows. Yeah. Everything would be fine. He'd practiced his testimony dozens of times, had run through every single possible question he could be asked, no matter the relevancy.

It would be fine.

Chapter End Notes

percy's attempt to protect himself and his emotions vs. one sad man

also, in case anyone was wondering, the motorcycle in the garage was the one percy had been using when peter first saw him in the garage and was scared shitless. it's an AI driven motorcycle. i picture it like this:

tony, who hasn't slept in two days: wanna.....go drive this fuckin,,,,motorcyle
percy, not asking a single question: ye

i present to you; this, but it's the rest of the government vs. sword

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/CbNP2ncAHOk/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>

"It would be fine" lmao

plumbing baby. goodbye

Testimony

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tuesday, August 5

10:46 AM

WSC Chamber, NY

Once they'd entered the chamber, minus Happy, Stark had led the way. As they walked, the various SWORD members paired off and left in different directions, until it was just the three of them left.

The chamber itself was enormous.

The judge's bench was on the far wall, raised high above the floor. Next to it, slightly lower, was where Bucky would be sitting. Rows of dark wood chairs and tables were lined up in a perfect semicircle, standing out against the plush royal blue carpet.

There was a second level, a balcony wrapped around the room, that held a few of the same desks. Tony took a seat in the very front row, leaving Bucky and Jackson alone. The commander pushed his sunglasses up the bridge of his nose. "Hanover's going to be presiding. She's good," He murmured as the chamber began to fill up. "Just stay calm."

Bucky took in a deep breath and nodded. "Stay calm." He echoed.

When he made his way to the judge's bench, he was aware of the countless eyes on him. The cameras were still setting up, but not yet filming.

The chair was plush and well made, but Bucky couldn't bring himself to relax in the slightest.

Jackson took his place behind him, a few feet to the right, just far enough to not take the focus off of Bucky.

When the doors opened, a tall woman striding in. She's dressed smartly; foregoing the typical robe for a nicely fitted suit. Her tightly coiled hair is pinned back, and a pair of horn-rimmed glasses are perched upon her nose. Around them, the cameras start up.

Willa Hanover calmly makes her way to the bench and takes her seat. She clears her throat and leans into the microphone. "Good morning, everyone. We have gathered today to hear the testimony and story of Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes." She turns towards him. "Please stand."

Taking a steadying breath, he does as he's asked. When he stands, his hands are loose by his sides, allowing the first glimpse of his metal hand sticking out from his sleeve. Around him, a dozen camera shutters go off.

Instead of a clerk speaking, Hanover continues. "Do you swear before us that the testimony you are about to give is the truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

He nods. "I do."

"You may be seated. Please state your full name for the record, then begin your testimony."

He sits back down in the chair. "My name is James Barnes," He says, steeling himself. More camera shutters go off. "And on February 1st, 1945, the Howling Commandos, myself included, went on a mission to capture a Hydra scientist, named Armin Zola, on a train passing through the Alps."

From the second row, a Councilman speaks up. "On whose orders?"

"Colonel Chester Phillips. Our commanding officer."

The Councilman nods, and Bucky continues. "At this point, France had been freed, so we flew into Lyon and made the rest of the way there on trucks and a few passenger planes. All the way to the Switz Alps."

"It took a week, about, to get there. We saw the train—they were going fast. Real fast. Hydra needed Zola somewhere." He wet his lips. "We stood on a cliff above the tracks. There was a cord, above, that we were going to use as a zipline."

A redheaded Councilwoman frowned. “That doesn't seem very efficient. What if you hadn't timed it right?”

Bucky shrugged. “In the words of Steve Rogers? *Bugs on a windshield.*”

He looked around for a second, and when nothing else was asked, he went on. “Me, Steve, and Jones were the only ones that used it. The others stayed on top of the cliff. Steve went first, then me, then Jones.” He recalled.

“That would be Gabe Jones, and Steve Rogers, Captain America?”

“Yes, ma’am. We landed on top of the train. Jones stayed on top, and me and Steve kicked in a door on the side. It seemed empty, at first. But when we were walking through the cars, a door automatically shut between us. There were these guys, all loaded up with this weird tech. They didn’t shoot bullets, but...well, it was like pure energy. It was straight out of a sci-fi novel.” This brought a smattering of murmurs around the chamber.

A bald Councilman leaned in. “These...energy beams. Was this the work of the item known as the Tesseract that Hydra had been experimenting on?”

From the front row, Tony made eye contact with him. Bucky gave an imperceptible nod, and chose his words carefully. “It was a gun shooting bright blue lights capable of taking out a tank, Councilman. There isn’t reason to believe it was anything else.”

Hanover nodded. “Continue,” She prompted. Bucky nodded.

“My gun jammed—Steve busted the door in between us open and saved my ass, actually. But then another one of those guys came up behind us. He had shit aim and blew a hole in the side of the train. We both hit the ground. Steve dropped his shield. He shot again, at me, and...” Bucky swallowed, clenching his fist in his lap. “I went out the side of the train. I was holding onto a railing, dangling over the canyon. Steve went out, too, hanging out the door. Trying to get me. He told me to grab his hand.”

The redheaded woman from before eyes widened. “...And what happened?”

Bucky ducked his head for a second, taking in a few calming breaths. He spoke so quietly that the microphone barely picked it up. “The railing broke. The last thing I remember is screaming Steve’s name as I fell.”

A hush fell over the chamber. He knew for sure every single camera was trained in close on his face, capturing every detail.

Hanover found her voice first. “I understand, past that moment, your recollections are...limited. What can you tell us of afterwards?”

He let out a breath. “An operating room. My arm was...unsalvageable. I only heard them say one thing—that they had to take my arm, and they wanted to make me a new one. And then, a man, saying to do it.”

Bucky rubs his thumb over the back of his metal hand. “After that, it’s a bit fuzzy. I was in a cell for a while. They drugged me. Then...” Another deep breath. “They started wiping me. They had this... *chair*. It messed with my head. Made me forget stuff.”

The thought of it alone made his skin crawl. “I don’t remember a lot after that. A few of the things they would make me do. Training.” A heavy weight settled on his chest. “Missions.”

“Assassinations, you mean?” A snide voice called out.

Bucky looked up. The man who had spoken was raising a single dark eyebrow. Bucky grit his teeth. “Usually, yes.”

“And this... *chair* , made you do this?”

“Yes, the *chair*, that had technology that fried my brains until I was barely a human being.” He bit out.

The man opened his mouth to retort, but before he could get anything out, Hanover’s stern voice rang out. “Let him speak, Councilman Graves.” She turned to him. “Is there anything else you can tell us?”

“What specifically would you like to know?”

“Anything about Hydra that isn’t common knowledge would be quite helpful, Sergeant Barnes.”

“Right,” Bucky worked his jaw. “I wasn’t the only attempt to make a Soldier. They had loads of them. Their first attempt, to my knowledge, was in 1942. Me and a large number of other war prisoners had been experimented on. A few of them had been there for a month, at most—the majority only a couple weeks.”

“So, this was a new project?”

“No,” Bucky shook his head. “Their subjects just kept dying.” He let out a humorless laugh, and didn’t bother to acknowledge the various horrified faces staring at him. “I don’t remember much of the original experimentations, either, other than the fact that it hurt like hell. They kept us barely lucid, so we couldn’t tell anyone what they were doing, if we ever got out.”

“When we weren’t being used in the labs, they had us in the factories, making weapons. I met some other soldiers there, and we got to talking. Every day, we went to the workstation. They were good people.” Bucky bit the inside of his cheek. “One day, I’d mouthed off to the wrong guy. He beat me bad enough I couldn’t work for a bit. The guys teamed up and...well, returned the favor for me.”

“We hadn’t even exchanged names, at this point. They got some good damage in on the guy, too. Eventually reinforcements got called in and they ended up in the infirmary right next to me. Solitary, after that.” His tone turned bitter. “I didn’t go with ‘em. I got switched to spending all my time in the labs.” He said with a grimace

“Then, one day, I got woken up, and Steve was standing above me. He was twice the size I remember him being, which was weird as hell, and he broke us all out, including the guys who’d gone to solitary for me.”

“Did you ever find out their names?”

“Sure did. Dum Dum Dugan, Gabe Jones, Jim Morita, James Falsworth, and Jacques Dernier.”

“The Howling Commandos,” One said, shocked.

“Yup.”

Hanover made a considering face. “Sergeant Barnes, do you have reason to believe you were taken from the bottom of the ravine was because you had previously been a Hydra prisoner? Specifically, a...” A pause. “*Memorable* one?” She settled on.

Bucky paused for a second. “It’s...possible.” He said quietly. “That, and the fact that I was known as a Howling Commando—Captain America’s best friend, at that.”

“And if not for this association, do you believe you wouldn’t have been taken?”

All he could say here was the deep, honest truth. “I’ve considered it. But there’s no way to be sure, so speculation is pointless.”

Once again, this brought up a round of murmurs. Bucky tried his best to not think of those cameras, the live footage, the countless televisions tuned in. The group of Rogues sitting in Wakanda, watching him admit that.

He swallowed. “Even once I had been turned into the Soldier, they kept trying for more. None of them succeeded, even decades later. I don’t know why; all I know is they kept trying. Up to the point when the file dump happened.”

Hanover nodded. “Is there any other relevant information you can give us? Any plans or ideas you were told of?”

Bucky pursed his lips. “With all due respect, Councilwoman, they never *told* me anything.”

“I was under the impression you were a rather important asset to them, Sergeant.” Graves, again, called out.

Bucky flinched at the word *asset*. His jaw clenched. “They told me no more than you would tell a gun you carried, Councilman. I wasn’t an associate to them, I was a weapon. No more. The only information I have is what I overheard, and even then, some of it I probably don’t remember.”

Graves scoffed. “You can’t even remember the information you are supposed to be giving us? I thought you were undergoing some revolutionary therapy made by the Futurist himself, hm? Or was it not all it was cracked up to be?”

Silence reigned in the chamber. Hanover cleared her throat, the tightness in her body only visible to Bucky. “Dr. Stark? If you have any input, now would be the time.”

He could see Tony’s clenched jaw from the front row. “Yes, Councilman, Sergeant Barnes is piloting a new type of therapy. And it is working, faster than *any* other viable option. However, it takes time. I understand if you don’t quite get how this new technology works, so I’ll try and dumb it down for you.” Bucky’s eyebrows shot up, and Graves visibly recoiled. He could’ve sworn Hanover smiled, ever so slightly.

Tony stood up, facing Graves directly. “Every session unblocks a certain set of memories. Of course he doesn’t remember everything, you dunce, his first session was a few weeks ago. It’d be beneficial to all parties if you sat for a second and thought about how much Sergeant Barnes has progressed in his recovery in such a short amount of time. Maybe it will prevent you from looking like a blubbering idiot in front of all your buddies and about two dozen news outlets.”

Graves opened his mouth to speak, but Tony ignored him. “And if you’re still concerned about this, then perhaps I could send you a paper I published on BARF and its effects. Maybe I could also lend you the team of scientists that would be required for you to understand it. One of my engineers used to be a Kindergarten teacher. Maybe she could help you.”

Bucky was unashamed to have poorly concealed a laugh with a cough. Satisfied, Tony sat down. “That’s all, Councilwoman.” He said primly.

Hanover bit her cheek to prevent a grin. “Right. Thank you for your...passionate words, Dr. Stark.”

Graves, on the other hand, looked like he was about to blow. “This still changes nothing, *Doctor*. No matter how much you enjoy bragging about your inventions, this man cannot provide us with accurate testimony! How are we even sure what he saw was real? What’s more likely; a miraculous recovery of memories, or, somewhere along the way, he finally snapped under the pressure?” He turned towards Bucky. “What were your exact words, Sergeant? They *fried your brains until I had no sense of self?*”

Two Councilmen in the row behind Tony exchanged speculative looks. He turned around and glared at them. The back row erupted in whispers. The people seated on the balcony's debate steadily kicked up in volume. Graves straightened his tie. "I believe my point is made, Councilwoman Hanover."

Hanover leaned back in her chair, ever so slightly, a calculating look in her eyes. Then, "Commander Jackson."

The man, who'd been standing silent guard to Bucky's right the entire time, looked surprised at the address. "Yes, ma'am?"

"In your professional opinion, is Sergeant Barnes of adequate state of mind to be telling the truth? Do you believe that what he has said is not only what he believes, but what actually occurred?"

Bucky tried not to deflate. Damn it, of course she had to ask him. Because there was no doubt in his mind that Jackson knew about the nightmares, the flashbacks, the insomnia and the late nights he spent wandering around the tower.

The man wouldn't lie for him. Shouldn't lie for him, anyways.

And *fuck*, if all of this had been for nothing, if everything he confessed in front of millions, the things he had sworn to never even think about...none of it was going to matter.

Jackson straightened his spine. Voice perfectly level, he said, "Without a doubt, ma'am."

Hanover raised an eyebrow; a nonverbal cue for him to elaborate.

He did so without even blinking. "Sergeant Barnes has been through a considerable amount of trauma, that's true, but I've never doubted him for a second. I believe with my whole heart everything he has said today are the words of a man who knows what he's talking about."

Graves crossed his arms. "You would stake your career on this, Jackson?"

When Jackson spoke again, there was a certain venom to his voice. One that made Bucky wonder

if he'd had past dealings with the unpleasant Councilman. "It's Commander to you, first of all. I don't go around calling you *Chris* . And I fail to see how that's relevant."

A slow smirk came across the man's face. "Is that a no?"

"Is *what* a no?" Jackson fired back.

Graves was persistent. "Would you, or would you not, stake your career on your position?"

Jackson seemed to stare straight into his soul. "No." He said calmly. "No, I would not."

And despite the fact that Bucky knew it was coming, he couldn't help the crushing weight in his chest.

"My life."

Bucky looked up, startled, towards Jackson. The man was standing, spine straight, chin parallel to the floor, shoulders perfectly squared. "Excuse me?" Graves said, stupefied.

"You grossly overestimated the value I put in this job. I wouldn't stake my career on my position, because unlike you, Councilman, I don't go half in on people in case I have to back out. Sergeant Barnes has my full and unwavering support. I would stake my *life* on this. Now, sit down, shut up, and let Barnes tell us what he's waited eighty years to."

For what seemed like the millionth time today, the chamber went silent, still, sending Jackson's echoing voice up into the rafters, ringing clearly for all to hear.

Bucky stared at Jackson, his eyes wide. The man finally turned his head to the side, just a little, and gave Bucky the tiniest smile. It left a warm feeling in his chest, and he grinned back.

Without prompt to do so, he continued speaking. "I did hear some information that, while it doesn't mean much to me, maybe it will to you. They talked about a Project Pegasus, for a while. The same with the infiltration of SHIELD. They seemed to think that, no matter how hard you looked, nobody would be able to fully weed out Hydra." The words left a bitter taste in his mouth.

“Occasionally, they mentioned names. Never real ones, but...Crossbones was one of them, so I figured it must have been important. There was one called Iapetus—the Titan from Greek mythology. Also known as The Piercer.”

It took Hanover a second, but she raised her brow. “Alexander Pierce, I assume?”

“The one and only. There was Sitwell; they called him Patsy. Not sure the reasoning behind that one. There...was Vasily Karpov. They called him Kingly. That’s what the name Vasily means. The Recruiter—her real name was Raina. The Clairvoyant, John Garrett. Wolf, Wolfgang von Strucker. And there were others, that I didn’t find out their real names. The Doctor, some guy they called Print, Augur, Zero, Tomb, and there was one named Th—”

Bucky saw it before he heard it.

The light trickles in through a small skylight above the secondary floor balcony, casting a slight glow upon the occupants. And it’s with that tiny amount of sun scraping through the clouds into the chamber below, Bucky sees the sunlight glint off the barrel of a gun.

The bang is deafening, and in an instant, people are ducking below their tables, arms over their heads.

A sole shot hits the ceiling right above Bucky’s head.

The shooter moves forward, to the edge of the balcony, and sets the rifle right over the railing, and points it directly at Bucky’s face.

And then, just like that, before Bucky can make use of the eighty years of training he’s got, the man just slumps over. The gun falls from his fingertips, hitting the floor below.

Security streams into the room. People are running out the doors, screaming. Reporters have kept their cameras running, and some are trying to yell over the chaos to tell their viewers what just happened. The entire second floor is evacuated within seconds, people shoving over one another, trampling each other, to get to an exit. Two men in suits burst into the chamber and grab Hanover, escorting her out, looking around furiously.

Even Stark is running, up instead of down, towards the man, and Bucky expects a familiar gold and scarlet color scheme will make an appearance soon.

Nobody notices Jackson bolt for the back door.

Nobody but Bucky.

He looks around wildly, but nobody is hurt, despite all the panic and screaming, and so Bucky doesn't hesitate to make a break for the same exit, slipping out without a scrap of attention on him.

Jackson only has a few seconds on him, so by the time Bucky skids around the corner, the bathroom door is still swinging. Bucky shoves it open with his shoulder, body tensed for *something*, he's not exactly sure what.

Out of all the possibilities, the one that never came to him was to find Jackson on the floor, leaning over a toilet, retching.

Bucky takes a few cautious steps closer. His face is drawn, a sickly gray, and he's dry heaving. What looks like his breakfast is already in the bowl, and Bucky winces. "Are—" His voice cracks a little, and he clears his throat. "Are you okay?"

Somehow, it gets even worse when Jackson startles at the sound of his voice. Jackson, who hadn't blinked that one time Tony had suddenly blown something up in the lab, who didn't even twitch when one of the SWORD agents had snuck up behind him as a joke.

Jackson's sunglasses were discarded off to the side, letting Bucky see the panicked look in his eyes. Was it the gunshots? He doubted it—in Jackson's line of work, that reaction just wouldn't fly.

His breathing was so fast he was almost hyperventilating, and Bucky was suddenly aware that the man was on the cusp of a panic attack. So fast it almost hurt, he sat down on the tile next to him. "I'm gonna touch you, alright? You're fine." He said softly, placing a hand between Jackson's trembling shoulder blades.

"Breath with me," He instructed, exaggerating his own breaths. It took a solid few minutes before Jackson stopped shaking, regaining control of his spasming chest. It was slow going, but Bucky

was persistent, rubbing his thumb across his back in a steady motion.

Once he'd calmed down a bit, Jackson brought his knees almost to his chest, resting his back against the wall. He dug the heels of his palms into his eyes. "Fuck," He hissed, voice wavering.

Bucky scooted backwards so he matched his position against the wall. "Fuck," He agreed, tipping his chin up towards the ceiling. "You wanna talk about it?"

Jackson choked on a laugh. "Do you?"

Bucky didn't move his head, but he glanced at the man out of the corner of his eye. "I mean, a little." He admitted. "You...I've never seen a reaction quite like that, honestly." One that had no plausible explanation.

The commander seemed to pick up on his meaning, and sighed, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, then pulling a face at the taste of bile. He seemed lost deep in thought, and Bucky decided to let him drift and collect himself for a moment.

In the meantime, he puzzled over what the hell could've caused something like that. Though their interactions were limited, Jackson seemed like a put together person, emotionally. Even sleep deprived and eating an affront against God, his mannerism were steady.

Then, Bucky remembered that one day, right after he'd arrived in New York, when he went down to the lab for a pre-BARF diagnostic.

"You need to take a break." Stark insists. "I get this is important, I really do, after what happened in Ontario—" He breaks off immediately, wincing, like he didn't even intend for the words to come out of his mouth.

The far more interesting, and almost concerning, reaction is the one belonging to Commander Jackson. At the mention of Ontario, his face, which before held a resigned, exasperated look, goes completely blank. His skin loses a bit of color, and he stiffens.

"Shit, I'm sorry—I shouldn't have—" It's then he notices Bucky.

It's the mention of the place, of Ontario, that had produced the only result like what Bucky was seeing in front of him right now.

"Jackson," He says slowly, "What happened in Ontario?"

Chapter End Notes

tony percy and bucky all in their bad bitch eras together
visual representation of them tag teaming graves's verbal smackdown:
<https://www.instagram.com/reel/CcTliFQpyYz/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>

pierce being nicknamed iapetus has no connection to percy. i just thought it was funny

bucky's getting close to the truth, y'all

graves: how can we know you're giving us good info??? you're kinda crazy

bucky:

bucky: bitch you ASKED ME TO COME HERE

i almost put a line in like that--

just. "...im telling you what i know. which is. exactly what you asked me to do. please stop acting like i just showed up in front of the building this morning like a feral raccoon."

bucky getting closer to the truth yuhhh

ALSO HAVE ANY OF YOU WATCHED HEARTSTOPPER????

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Monitor Rooms

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tuesday, August 5

11:13 AM

WSC Chamber, NY

“Jackson,” He says slowly, “What happened in Ontario?”

And Bucky knows he’s hit the mark, because the man absolutely freezes, every muscle locking into place. Then, unexpectedly, he laughs. It’s not a happy sound.

“It’s a long story. But it starts with the fact that I’m an Enhanced.” It’s a confession of the deepest, quietest kind, torn out of him. “I use my Enhancement to counteract the fact that I’ve been blind since I was a teenager.”

Bucky’s jaw doesn’t drop, but it’s a close thing. “I’m sorry, you’re blind?”

“Yeah. I couldn’t work at SHIELD or the HSRD without raising some serious questions, so I just...” He shrugged. “I pretended. For a really long time. I kept all that shit buried because I didn’t want to end up getting yanked into some lab or, even worse, the *Raft*.” His voice cracked. “Hell, I didn’t even tell Tony at first. I guess I thought he’d assume I wasn’t capable of doing my job. I was hunting down Hydra agents and the like in SI.”

“And I was so damn stupid that I couldn’t piece together the warnings I’d gotten to know something bad was going to happen, and got kidnapped. There was a crazy-ass Hydra Doctor,” Shudders wrack his body, and he curls further in on himself. “He—he was delusional. Thought I was some, some sign from God, and so he started cutting me open and then...” Jackson choked on a sob. “I only remember the needle. It was just one. A tiny vial.”

Tears stain his cheeks, and he furiously wipes them away as they fall. “It killed me,” He whispered. “Or, well, I killed myself because I wanted everything to just *stop hurting*.” He’s struggling to get a breath in. “I couldn’t even die right, and because of it, I *butchered* a hundred people and didn’t even notice until afterwards.”

Bucky blinked a couple times, his lips parted in surprise, slightly unsure of what to do here. To see the other man so vulnerable like this. “You...”

Jackson shakes his head again, pressing his face into his knees.

The story is so familiar, it positively aches. Deep in his bones, Bucky is filled not with sympathy, but with an overwhelming feeling of empathy, enough for him to drown in. He swallows. His own hands are shaking just thinking about it, but he feels the overwhelming need to speak, to let him know that he’s not alone in this.

The ice between them was broken, and it dragged him under, forcing him to adjust to the depth of the frigid waters.

“Vasily Karpov.” He whispers. “He was my handler for...most of what I remember.” He blinks furiously. “He’d...train me. Make me fight. It—it was usually against prisoners. He said it was to train the reactions right out of *it* . I was always an *it* .”

He inhales, then plunges onward. “There was this little town, Dijsna. I don’t remember where exactly it used to be. Someone defected, and hid there. We went in there and razed the entire place to the ground. Killed the men and women, took the children. The healthy ones went to the labs. They lined the sick ones up and had me shoot them all point blank, right in front of each other.”

Bucky presses his fist to his mouth. “I don’t know who got off better, honestly.”

Jackson blinks heavily, and turns his head towards Bucky.

“I remember all their faces. None of them were older than sixteen. The smallest one was two. The infants didn’t even make it that far. She...had these pigtails. Little green bows in them. I haven’t gone to sleep without seeing what they looked like soaked in her blood since I broke the programming.” He scrubs at his eyes. “And every day, I wake up and I wonder what’s going to happen if they get their Asset back. *Every day* .”

Bucky squeezes his eyes shut. “Everything that I’ve done has cut a piece out of me. And I’m not sure if I can ever get it back.” He confesses.

He means to look over at Jackson just for a second, but is struck dumb into staring.

It's the first time he's seen his eyes, not shrouded by the dark or the tinted glasses perched on his nose. Twisted around them, curving over the bridge of his nose and up his temples, burn scars twist into discolored flesh. But that's not even close to the most striking thing about him—it's his eyes themselves.

They're the richest, brightest color of sea green Bucky's ever seen. They're the color of what the ocean looks like in a dream, where you relax in the hot sand and bask in the sun. Colors like that don't seem to belong in a world like this, where two murders sit together and confess the crimes they don't fully remember.

Jackson ducks his head, the tips of his ears turning red. His brows go down, his jaw clenching in a silent anger that seems all too familiar to him.

"Sorry," Bucky blurts out. "You, just...I've never seen eyes that color."

The other man's lip part, every so slightly, in surprise. "It's usually the scars that do it for people." He admits in a quiet voice.

Bucky just shrugs. "You should see my shoulder where my arm connects," He says. "Whole thing is a mess of scar tissue." He's not sure if it's because of wounds sustained in the fall, or if it's because he was awake and thrashing when they cut it off. He doesn't say that aloud, though.

Jackson's sudden grin, no matter how slight, is like a sun breaking through the clouds. "Yeah," He repeats. "I should see it, sometime."

It takes Bucky a second, but he groans and drops his head.

His face is still wet, shoulders still trembling, but he feels lighter, somehow. "Didn't you work for SHIELD? For Nick Fury himself? How did you even *hide* that?"

And Jackson has the audacity to turn his way and *wink*.

They sit in comfortable silence for a long few minutes, regaining the control of their respective breathing patterns. Then, voice so soft it's barely audible, Bucky says, "I don't think you wanted to

hurt those people, Jackson.”

Jackson rests his chin on his folded arms. “I don’t think you wanted to hurt all those people, Barnes.” He echoes.

Bucky looks down. “Yeah,” He said softly. “Me neither.”

Jackson nods, not looking entirely present. “I did, though. I remember wanting them gone.”

Bucky goes still, just for a second. Out of all the things, he didn’t quite expect that. “If you’d had control of your abilities, would you have killed them all?”

It's only one question, but Jackson sucks in a breath. Then, in a quiet voice, “No.”

“There we have it.” Bucky says it with a sense of finality, of pure certainty that’s reminiscent of Jackson’s steady voice back in the chamber.

Jackson’s voice sounds a thousand miles away. “They were so scared. I could feel their heartbeats. They were terrified of me. They cried, James.” He whispers. “I took control of them. I found their bodies, felt their heartbeats and heard their voices, and I took control of their blood and killed them. They just fell to the ground like puppets. All at once.”

“They were bad people, but they didn’t deserve that. Nobody does.” His brow furrows. “I promised myself I’d never do it again. But...I wasn’t paying attention to the second floor like I should’ve. The gunman surprised me, and I panicked. I panicked,” He repeated. “And look what I did.”

Understanding dawns on Bucky. “You...you used your abilities on him.”

“I did, even though I swore I would never do something like that again. And it was so easy, James. Just one tug, and he was dead. Nobody will even know it was me. It’ll show up as a heart attack or a stroke or a brain hemorrhage—” He chokes off, a hand covering his mouth. Jackson jerks forward, and he’s hunched over the toilet once more, heaving.

Bucky lurches forward on autopilot, putting a hand on his upper back. He’s already emptied his

stomach; nothing comes up but sickly yellow bile.

Bucky wants to ask so many things right now, every instinct in him is itching to try and fix this, but before he can, Jackson's watch buzzes. Bucky recognizes it right away. An *M*, and then a *SOS*.

Quite honestly, Mal had been bored out of her mind when it happened.

She'd been sitting in her position; a bench exactly twelve feet from the doors to the chamber. Slouched over, an intern's pass with a fake name pinned to her breast pocket. A pair of cheap buds were clearly displayed in her ears, though nothing was playing.

Every so often, her watch buzzed.

A short followed by a long for Aspen, a long and two shorts for Dan, and so on. An easy, almost imperceptible way for everyone to check in.

If Mal got up and checked, she knew she would find everyone right where they were supposed to be. Lee standing in the hallway, using his tall stature to his advantage to pose as a regular old guard. Bridgette on the ground floor of the chamber, in a press pass and trendy coat. Aspen by the roof access, standing back in a point inaccessible by the cameras, to Dan's dismay. If she thought about it, she could clearly picture his angry murmuring to himself as he rolled around aimlessly in the security room. Ross was nearby, Mal knew, in a gray jumpsuit and a ballcap, pushing around a janitorial cart that carried a couple ounces of aerosol tranquilizers in place of glass cleaner.

She sat there, mindlessly staring at her phone for what seemed like hours until Bridgette buzzed in, signaling that the testimony had begun. From there, Mal switched apps, to one connected directly to the camera Bridgette was manning inside.

Mal didn't dare to turn on the sound—she was supposed to keep her ears open, just in case. Instead, she waited as subtitles wrote themselves right on her screen. It was fascinating to watch; almost as much as the proceedings themselves.

The *rudimentary technology*, his words, not hers, was a present from Dr. Stark. More specifically, he called it a ‘housewarming gift’, along with a few other fancy things that had Dan salivating. At that point, SWORD had barely been a day old—he’d been waiting for them when they first walked into their new buildings.

No matter its slightly strange origins, it was a lifesaver.

She absently chewed on her thumb, eyes flitting across the screen. Bridgette kept the camera steady, trained at a mild focus, just enough to get Hanover, Barnes, and Jackson in the same shot—though their boss was far off to the side.

Hearing what Barnes had to say was...well, it was depressing. She could see just enough of his face to grasp the faraway look in his eyes, the way he tightened when he talked about what Hydra did to him.

Bastards, the lot of them.

She’d just been watching Chris Graves get his ass handed to him on a platter when a round of panicked buzzes hit her watch. It’s from Lee—and it’s very clearly spelling out an SOS.

Mal was on her feet in seconds. And right as she moved forward, a sole gunshot rang out.

From inside the chamber.

She didn’t even blink; she sprinted across the hall and burst inside without a second thought.

It was chaos. Councilmen were ducked under tables, shoving past her to get out. Jackson and Barnes were both gone; probably for the best. If they were together, they were safe. Aspen had materialized onto the balcony level, and Dr. Stark was suiting up next to them. Between them, a man lay. He didn’t look like much; flat, brown hair, pasty skin, a moderately cheap suit. She watched, just for a second, as Aspen leaned down, sticking two fingers to the underside of his chin. And then, slowly, shook their head.

Bridgette was down below with Ross, the latter wearing gloves and holding a rifle a foot away from his body, lips curled.

Everything was so loud; screaming and overlapping voices of reporters, pounding footsteps of people fleeing and security searching through the building. Mal looked around wildly. “Where are the others?” She yelled.

Bridgette cupped a hand to her ear, replying something intelligible.

“Dan and Lee!” She repeated herself, craning her neck around. Her heart felt like it was going to beat right out of her chest, aching to break free of her ribcage. Bridgette’s face went white. “Dan’s in the security room. Lee’s doing rounds in the halls.”

Mal’s brain went still. Bridgette scanned the room, then rushed forward, dropping both her hands on Mal’s shoulders. “Go ,” She urged. “We have to take care of the evidence.” Her hands were shaking. “ *Go .*” She repeated.

She didn’t need to hear Bridgette twice. Thanking God she didn’t wear heels, Mal spun around and weaved between the feeling people. The hallway outside, which had been practically deserted before, was now stuffed full of people, shoulder to shoulder. Some were trying to get a look in, others who wanted nothing more than to be far away.

“Move, move, move!” She screamed, shoving people aside with wild abandon. Lee could’ve been at any place in the building; she just prayed it wasn’t the wrong one. It was smarter to start with Dan—his position was stationary.

He should’ve seen the tapes. He should’ve checked in. The only reason he wouldn’t have...

The security room was nestled behind a service door, up a thin set of stairs, and the third identical door on the left. Mal didn’t slow down one bit the entire time, pumping her arms and taking the steps three at a time in her ridiculous linen slacks.

She skidded into the turn, throwing open the door with her shoulder.

Mal barely caught herself from slipping, her flats losing their grip on the slick tile. She looked down, just for a second, and recoiled. Blood coated the bottom of her shoe, as it did the rest of the floor, some of the wall, and part of the chair.

Dan lay in the middle of it, sprawled out on the cold tile. His glasses were off to the side, a few feet away from his outstretched fingertips. Both lenses were shattered and the frames were crushed, like somebody had stomped on them. His hair, usually soft and spiky, was matted down to his head with his own blood.

Kneeling next to him, was Lee. Arguably, she looked worse. Her shirtsleeves were rolled up past her elbows, but it didn't save the cuffs from being soaked crimson, along with her forearms and hands. The lanyard she'd been wearing, fake name, security clearance, and all, was thrown back, half under the rolling office chair. Ashy blonde hair was down in her face, fallen loose from its typical half-up, half-down style. Her suit jacket was in her iron grip, and she was using it to staunch the bleeding coming from Dan's...well, everywhere.

Her head snapped up, staring right at Mal. Lee's eyes, that startling, pale color, seemed to see right through her. "Medical," She rasped.

Mal swallowed, nodding frantically. She fumbled for her phone, her hands trembling. As soon as she connected to the line, she choked out only a few sentences. "We have an agent down. We need immediate EMS."

Lee was pressing down on the compress so hard her arms were trembling, but when Mal offered to take it, she shook her head. "Just letting go for those few seconds..." She shook her head. Her lower lip was quivering. "I can hold out."

It was an excruciating few minutes. Mal tried to look anywhere but her two friends, instead around the room. The desk Dan must have been sitting at, the one with the monitor showing the chamber, held a deep gouge. The chair was a few feet away, like it had been ripped backwards. There was a bullethole in the wall. Splatters of blood were scattered across the plaster.

Mal tried not to gag. All of a sudden, she became aware of the stench of it in the room, permeating every pore.

When the EMTs burst in, a stretcher between them, Lee's face seemed to close in on itself. Gone was the blank look, the shell shocked face. It was like watching a lake freeze over.

She allowed the two to lift him onto the stretcher, barking out orders the entire time. The two uniformed medics shared a look, and without glancing up, Lee snapped. "I've been a paramedic for longer than you've had pubes. Now get over here and do what I tell you to."

And maybe it was the iron in her voice, or the blood coating her clothes, but they complied.

Dan was carted out of the room with an oxygen mask covering his face, sirens slipping through the cracked door as they ran out with him.

Leaving Mal alone in the room, her shoes covered in her friend's blood. She looked down. Lee's suit jacket was abandoned on the tile, the original gunmetal gray overridden by scarlet. Numbly, she bent over and picked it up.

She took a few robotic steps out of the security room, softly shut the door behind her, and slid down the wall outside, the blazer clutched in her fingers. Everything was a dull roar in her ears, like it was happening a mile away.

She barely remembered tapping out her signal and then an SOS.

All she can feel is the blood sliding under the shoes, how there was enough to form a scarlet layer, on the floors and the furniture and Lee and *Dan*.

"—al! Mal!" She blinks, and Jackson is knelt in front of her. His hand is on her shoulder. "Mal?" He repeats.

She blinks. "I..." Mal swallows. "Dan," She whispers.

His face takes on a grave look. "I know." He murmurs. "But we need to go. He's already on his way to the hospital." Jackson stands up, brushes off his pants with one hand and offers the other to her.

She takes it without hesitation, and he hauls her up like she weighs nothing. It's only then she notices Sergeant Barnes is behind him, a worried look on his face. In spite of everything, she takes a second to turn towards him. "You good?"

He just shrugs. "Been worse."

Aspen, Bridgette, Ross, and Dr. Stark are waiting for them in the hallway. The rifle is long gone,

probably already en route to evidence lockup. The man's body is gone, as well. Mal finds herself wishing she'd gotten a better look at his face.

Dr. Stark gives Jackson a weighted look. His brow is furrowed, mouth twisted in worry. The concern isn't surprising, but...there's just something knowing in his eyes that makes her feel like she's missing something.

As soon as they're in hearing range, Bridgette is pressing them. "Where are they?" Her eyes, a warm hazel color, are bright with worry. When nobody answers for a second, she takes a step forward.

Then, her eyes catch the blazer in Mal's arms. Lee's blood soaked blazer.

Bridgette almost collapses right then and there. She would've, actually, if Ross hadn't been standing there ready to support her. "What *happened*?" She chokes out, breath hitching. "Where are they?"

Mal opens her mouth, then snaps it shut. How does she tell them? How on Earth can she explain everything that happened, everything she saw?

Jackson places a hand on her shoulder as if he can hear her racing thoughts. "Dan was attacked." He said soberly. "Lee got to him just in time. The ambulance arrived fifteen minutes ago. They should be at the hospital any moment."

Aspen's face goes ashen. Ross's lips part in shock.

Bridgette's eyes are glued to the blazer. Mal looks down at it for a second longer, then slowly holds it out towards her. "She was using it to staunch the bleeding." She explains in a subdued tone. The other woman doesn't respond. She takes the jacket, running a patch of clean fabric between her thumb and forefinger. Ross places a gentle hand on her arm.

"Which hospital?" Dr. Stark's voice is decisive. "We'll leave the cars. The quinjet can get us anywhere in the city in under ten minutes."

"Queens Presbyterian."

Dr. Stark nods once, and pulls out his phone. He takes a few steps away, exchanging clipped words with whoever's on the other line.

Standing like this, it's glaringly obvious the group is less than whole. Aspen should be standing next to Dan, exchanging snippy words that seem harsh until they both burst out laughing. Instead, they're swaying slightly in place, looking strange and untethered. Bridgette should be standing next to Lee, not clutching her bloody jacket while Ross did his best to keep her from spiraling.

Mal buries her face in her hands, and when she comes away, her face is streaked with her friend's blood.

Chapter End Notes

like all good gays, percy and bucky trauma dump on each other at the worst fucking time

percy bucky
getting controlled by hydra assholes who made them kill a bunch of people

rip dan lmao

also i may have some art of the SWORD children including our fav commander :)
would you guys be interested in seeing that?

im a bit late, but i hope everyone who celebrates had a pleasant Beltane, Eid Al Fitr and Ramadan!!

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Pattern

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tuesday, August 5

10:46 PM

Wakandan Royal Palace, Wakanda

This felt all too familiar to Natasha.

Staying up late to catch a news segment, keeping her eyes peeled for the people she knew.

It was clear Barnes was nervous, up on the stand. He was tense, his jaw clenched throughout most of it. When he spoke, his voice wavered, but he always plowed on. If that had been her up there, talking about the Red Room...

She doesn't think she could've done it. And she's sure she couldn't have while one of the Councilman was sniping questions at her.

Clint's feet were plopped on her lap, a blanket settled over his legs—and hers, by extension. The contact was familiar, casual, in a way a younger Natasha never imagined it could be.

They were the only two on the loveseat—Sam sat on the end of the couch, closest to them. Steve was in the middle, Maximoff on the other side. There was a tension between the three that you didn't have to be a superspy to see—ever since Barnes and Steve had gotten in that fight, Sam had been noticeably colder. Steve had been wrecked over what he'd said; she could tell he'd regretted his words right as they'd come out.

The issue wasn't between them, mainly.

It was Maximoff.

Steve had always been on her side, advocating her and trying his best to nudge her in the right

direction. Coddled her, Natasha privately thought. But she'd crossed a line, even to Steve, when she'd threatened Barnes so brazenly.

For now, though, they'd all tabled their grievances in favor of settling in to watch the testimony.

Barnes started off with recounting the day he fell. During the end of it, Steve's eyes were tightly closed, his face drenched in regret and grief. When he got to Hydra, to what they did to him, that all quickly changed to pure, undiluted, fury.

Despite all Steve's flaws, he did really care for Barnes. He was most definitely misguided, but to some extent, Natasha couldn't blame him.

To some extent.

"He looks...better," Clint murmured to her during a brief lapse of silence of the footage. He was right—Clint's eyes always were. It was hard to quantify; Barnes's gaze still held that haunted, dark circled look, his posture tense, face hard, but...

Somehow, he just looked calmer.

Maybe the conditioning had been taking some invisible toll on him, even when it wasn't activated. Just the simple act of chipping away at it had taken a weight off his shoulders.

When Chris Graves spoke up, Clint booed and tossed a throw pillow at the screen. Though she shushed him, it was a sentiment Natasha shared. From her understanding, the Councilman was far more trouble than he was worth.

On screen, Hanover turned to Barnes.

"Sergeant Barnes, do you have reason to believe you were taken from the bottom of the ravine was because you had previously been a Hydra prisoner? Specifically, a..." A pause. *"Memorable one?"*

He visibly hesitated here, choosing his words carefully . *"It's...possible. That, and the fact that I*

was known as a Howling Commando, Captain America's best friend, at that."

Steve sucked in a sharp breath.

"And if not for this association, do you believe you wouldn't have been taken?"

And when he answered, here, Natasha could've sworn he looked directly at the camera, directly at them, remorse in his eyes. *"I've considered it. But there's no way to be sure, so speculation has no point."*

"Oh, God," Steve whispered. "You don't think..." He looked at Natasha, first, his eyes desperate. She looked away.

He buried his face in his hands.

"They told me no more than you would tell a gun you carried, Councilman. I wasn't an associate to them, I was a weapon. No more."

She held back a flinch at Barnes's next words. It was all too familiar to her; being thought of an asset and nothing more. As if he could sense her thoughts; which, at this point, he might as well be able to, Clint put a light hand on her arm.

When Hanover called Stark up, Natasha's eyebrows ticked upwards. Oh, this was about to get *interesting*. While Natasha was, unfortunately, unable to give Graves the smackdown he deserved, at least she could count on the verbal lashing Stark would inevitably dish out.

Distantly, in the back of her mind, a voice murmured something about how, after all this time, she could still rely on him.

Clint was openly giggling by the time Stark finished. Natasha's lips curled up into a grin; even Steve had lost some of his tension.

Maximoff's lips curled. "God," She said derisively, "He has no respect for anyone."

Steve beat her to it, surprisingly. “I would’ve said the same,” He snapped. Then, considering, “Just, probably not as well put together.”

She looked truly shocked, mouth agape. Steve paid her no mind, returning his focus to the screen. Natasha and Clint shared a significant look. At first, Steve had clearly had some sort of issue about BARF being made personally by Stark—but after seeing Barnes, clearly fine and *better*, he’d gotten over it in an instant. Seeing Stark not hesitate to defend the man clearly helped, too. Yeah, there was hope for Steve yet.

Graves kept going, and Natasha rolled her eyes. God, what a prick.

Stark being called up wasn’t a surprise to her—he made the tech, obviously he would be called up. When Hanover said Jackson’s name, though, now *that* was unexpected. To him, too—it was only visible for a second, but she saw the confusion on his face, though the sunglasses made it a bit tough.

And since when was he a *Commander* ? And of what? Once again, Jackson had completely blindsided her.

And holy *shit* , if she thought Stark’s barrage of insults were bad, well, Jackson’s cutting words, still somehow managing to sound professional and curt, were so much worse. And by worse, she obviously meant better.

Jackson was full of surprises, it seemed. And not only to her—watching Barnes’s expressions as the man spoke was illuminating. Like herself, Barnes seemed shocked by Jackson’s loyalty, how easily he defended those around him. The pure conviction on his face, the angry righteousness in the way he spoke...

How somebody could work for an organization like SHIELD and still come out the other end a truly good person, she had no idea.

Barnes listed off name after name, and Natasha couldn’t help the slightly maniacal grin.

Hydra had really fucked up when they thought they could control James Barnes.

The déjà vu hit along with the bullet.

It reminded her scarily of last year, the Stark Gala, watching Jackson go down. This time, though, it was the gunman who fell. It was bizarre—lining up a kill shot, and then dropping dead himself?

Nobody was that lucky, even after all the good credit Barnes had surely earned over his years of suffering.

The footage cut out a second later. The last thing they saw was people fleeing, panicked voices overlapping each other. Then, the screen went dark.

“Well,” Clint said, breaking the silence that had fallen over them. “I’m sensing a pattern here I don’t really like.”

“At least nobody got shot, this time,” Was all Natasha offered.

Wednesday, August 6

2:27 AM

New York Presbyterian Hospital, Queens

They’ve been camped out in the waiting room for hours. The sun had long set, depriving them of the natural light from the window they’d been relying on.

Lee had come out barely half an hour after they’d arrived. They’d all crowded around her in an instant, eyes full of silent questions.

She’d just shook her head. “They,” Her voice cracked in a distinctly uncharacteristic display. “They aren’t sure.”

Bridgette hadn’t left her side, pressed close under her arm.

It was Aspen who'd eventually made them leave, surprisingly. "You're covered in blood," They'd hissed. "Go home and get changed. If anything happens, you know we'll call."

The two had left a few hours ago. There was no news to tell them, so they didn't call. They were sleeping, Ross hoped. At least resting.

Dr. Stark had seen to it that the best surgeons available had been flown in. When he mentioned it, Mal let out a sob and barreled into his arms. In any other situation, it would've been funny how surprised he looked.

Aspen had eventually lost the fight against sleep, currently curled up in an armchair. Jackson had left a bit ago, as well. Not to go home, to get some rest, but to one of the emptier hallways. His face had been grim, voice hollow. "I need to call his next of kin,"

Ross didn't envy him.

It was just him and Mal, now. They'd shared a slightly stale pack of Cheez-Its from the vending machine about half an hour ago, and hadn't spoken a word since.

Quite frankly, Mal looked horrible. Her cheeks were sunken in, lips cracked and bloody from her relentless chewing. The haunted look on her face was what really worried Ross, though. Never had he seen that expression on his friend's face.

Ross didn't envy her, either.

Bucky was quite familiar with feeling lost.

Lost when he first snapped out of the programming, waking up in a world so different from what he remembered as his own. Lost when Steve first saw him, and Bucky looked into those blue eyes and knew he should feel *something*. Lost when he drifted around the hallways in Wakanda like some sort of ghost of a war long won.

Coming to the tower, oddly enough, had been the first time in a while he felt like he...well, not belonged, but had a purpose.

But now, the feeling returned with full force, like a battering ram to the chest.

Watching the SWORD members, all, sans one, cope was hard. There was nothing he could offer, here. Not for them.

Nobody had recognized him, thankfully—not that there was anybody to do so. The hospital was strangely deserted. Whether that was on purpose or not, he was unsure. He left the SWORD team to one another's company, instead going to wait in the adjacent room.

He wasn't quite sure if he was supposed to be going places unsupervised—so, eventually, he followed the distant sound of Jackson's voice. When he turned the corner, the man was pacing back and forth on the phone.

The other person on the line was distraught; extremely so.

"I'll give you more news as soon as I get it," Jackson said softly. The other line said something soft, tearful, and then ended the call.

Bucky watched as Jackson put the phone down, shakily, then ran a hand through his hair. "Fuck," He breathed out, rubbing his forehead.

A tad hesitant, Bucky rapped his knuckles on the doorframe. Jackson didn't turn towards him, but he gave a little nod. "James," He greeted halfheartedly.

He entered the room fully, leaning against the plain white wall. "How are you holding up?" Bucky found himself asking.

Jackson shook his head. "I got the report. I...I'm trying to figure out how to tell the others." He rubs at his throat. "They attacked him a few minutes before the shot went off. He was on monitor duty." It's strange, almost, hearing the emotion the man was too tired to try and conceal in his voice.

“Jackson...” Bucky shifts a little, trailing off.

“Just...Gods, call me Percy.” He tugs at his shirt cuffs. “They’re still in surgery. *Still*. His face got slammed into the screens. There’s so much glass in his head, they’re not even sure if they’ll be able to get it out. He was strangled. His ribs are splintered. He got shot twice. Once in the stomach, the other in his neck. It’s a miracle his spinal cord wasn’t severed.” Jackso— *Percy* lets out a sniff. “They aren’t sure he’ll make it, and I have to go out and tell everyone that.”

Comfort has never been Bucky’s thing. He doubts Jackson wants it right now, anyways. Instead, he crosses his arms. “Do they know who did it?”

Percy shakes his head. “We’re working on it, but...Gods, this is a shit show.” He runs a hand through his hair. “The shooter was identified. Nick Hodgins. A mechanic from rural Georgia. He’s...a nobody. Never even left his home town, before this.”

Bucky’s face contorts. “How’d a mechanic from Georgia make it to the WSC chamber with enough firepower to take out half the Council?”

“The leading theory?” Percy rolls his jaw. “He had help.”

“Help?”

“Hodgins was...a certain type of guy. You know; never shuts up about the Second Amendment, thinks immigrants are coming to steal the land he already stole, goes to Chick-Fil-A instead of *literally* anywhere else...” Percy shrugged. “You know.”

“Let me guess. Anti-Enhanced?”

“Emphatically.”

“Great.”

“Yep. It’s not a stretch to believe that some fringe group contacted him, and he was all too eager to help.”

It did make sense, in a way. “He would’ve had to have someone on the inside, to get into the chamber.” Bucky notes.

Percy nods. “The security footage was wiped. We’re going to send someone to do some asking around, but my money’s on one of the guards.”

Bucky thought about it for a second—the guards didn’t work in pairs. Nobody would notice if one deviated from the patrol schedule for a minute. “Makes sense,” He agreed. “Are you going back?”

He receives a shake of the head. “After how close your would-be-assassin got? Nah, I’m sticking with you for a bit.”

It stuns him, for a second. “Are you sure?”

Percy doesn’t waver. “Yep.”

“Oh,” Bucky blinks. “Thanks. I’ll...try not to get killed?”

“I’d appreciate it.” Percy replies dryly.

Percy only leaves the hospital when he has to.

Morning is rearing its head once more, and the visitor room begins to fill up. As much as it kills him to leave Dan and all the others, he has to stick by Bucky, and a crowded hospital is certainly the opposite of where he should be.

It’s Lee who calls him, six hours later. “He’s alive.” She says in lieu of greeting. “Stable.”

“And the rest?”

He hears her swallow over the line. “They’re unsure.”

The Dan that comes out of that hospital might not be able to walk. Maybe to move his neck. Maybe, if he lost oxygen for that long, he wouldn’t be able to do a lot more.

He gets set up in the ICU. No visitors.

And there’s nothing Percy can do about it.

Instead, he sits in the tower common room, computer balanced on one knee. He’d been working for hours, and FRIDAY eventually had enough and, in an ironic role reversal, had Tony drag him out of his work.

He took a long sip of his water bottle. Tony and FRIDAY had been keeping diligent eyes on the media reaction to the testimony—nudging people along in the right directions, occasionally getting people banned if they said something unsavory.

“I know he’s a hundred year old assassin, but damn, that jawline.” Tony reads aloud.

Bucky splutters. “Excuse me?”

Tony looks up from his phone just long enough to give him a bemused grin. “Welcome to social media, Barnes.”

Percy smiles into his lap.

“Bunch of stuff about Hanover, couple thirst tweets there, uh, oh, some shit-talking about Graves—I’m liking that. Most of it’s sympathy for you,” He summarizes. “The most common opinion here is that you’re innocent.” Tony makes a humming noise, looking back down at his phone. *“Sergeant Barnes wasn’t in control, effects of brainwashing, strength of breaking through conditioning,”* He lists off, reading snippets of tweets. “And—oh, *how someone with thighs like that can be considered a criminal, I’ll never understand.*”

Percy sprays water out of his nose. Bucky chokes on his own spit. “Are you serious?”

“As an assassination attempt, ICEE.”

Bucky groans. “Somehow, this is worse.”

Tony shrugs. “Eh, you get used to it. It just gets to be funny at some point.”

Internally, Percy has never been more glad he just stood in the background. Tony seems to sense his relief, though, and raises a single brow. “Oh, you didn’t escape either, Jackson. You really thought you were safe?”

It’s Bucky’s turn to laugh, now. Percy considers throwing something at him, but stops short, because that’s the first time he’s actually heard him laugh. It’s a nice sound—round and surprisingly light.

Tony clears his throat dramatically. “User...dear Lord, user *OatmealAsscrack* posted, and I quote, *are we just going to ignore how damn **fine** that bodyguard guy is?*”

Percy’s face burns red, and he drops his head into his hands.

They both laugh, and though it’s at his expense, Percy can’t find it in himself to be annoyed. Everything has just been so heavy lately, it’s nice to just sit there.

Tony starts reading other posts; most serious, others weird enough to make Bucky crack up.

Percy’s not sure why he told him everything he did, back in the Council building. If Hydra gets to him, they’ll know everything he does. And that’s one weakness Percy can’t let get out. He just *can’t*.

But for some reason, he couldn’t bring himself to regret it.

Maybe it’s just because he’s tired of lying so much, all the time, hiding himself under layers upon

layers of deceit and hidden wounds. Or, maybe it's just because Bucky gets it. He understands the horror, the revulsion, feeling the blood coat your hands that you don't quite remember spilling.

Maybe it's because Percy had the Doctor, but Bucky had Vasily Karpov.

Two ghosts that haunt them still.

Bucky splits off to his apartment first, leaving Tony and Percy in the common room.

Tony waits a precious few seconds until the elevator closes down the hallway, then looks to Percy. "What happened?" His voice is laced with concern.

His friend shrugs weakly. "Which part?"

"You ran out of the chamber."

Percy's breathing stutters as a smile runs away from his face. "I killed that guy." He says, voice going suddenly soft. "Didn't mean to."

"Oh, Percy," Tony whispers. "Are...are you alright?" He'd seen how much of a wreck Percy was after the nightmares, where he used his abilities like that. To have it actually happen, and with a body count...

"Could be worse," He offers lamely. "Bucky and I talked."

Ah. Cautiously, he asks, "And...?"

Percy rubs a hand down his face. "Gods, Tony, I don't think I can do this." He admits. "He just... it's so easy to see myself in him."

“You don’t think...” Tony grimaces. “You don’t think you could kill him, if you had to?”

Numbly, Percy leans back. “No,” He breathes. “I know I could, so easily, but I think a big part of me would go with him.”

Tony swallows, feeling the guilt crash down on him. “I’m sorry, Percy. If there was anyone else...” But the truth is, if it comes down to it, Percy is the only one who stands a chance against the Winter Soldier unarmed. If Tony can’t get to his suit, well...he’s toast. But Percy doesn’t need a suit—he never did.

“I know.” Percy acknowledges. It’s then Tony catches the look in his eyes; the steely determination, showing a hint of the iron spine of Percy Jackson. “I know.” He repeats.

Chapter End Notes

natasha feels time babey

steve having enough with wanda's shit :) :) :) :)

i know twitter would have a fucking field day with that testimony. like, i bet there's already fan edits being made.

in case you were wondering, the person that came up with the username OatmealAsscrack was the same friend who bribed me with a pringle to keep percy alive in the last book

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Super-Abundance of Dreams

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Thursday, August 7th

11:25 AM

Stark Tower, NY

Bucky is leaning against the counter waiting for his tea to finish steeping, listening to Tony's distant voice. It's a conference call, and a particularly aggravating one, by the sound of it. After he hears Tony repeat himself for the ninth time, Bucky shrugs and begins to make another cup.

By the time the man comes in, Bucky is waiting, and presses the warm mug into his hand. Tony thanks him, then takes a sip. He frowns, lowering the cup. "Coffee," He whines.

He gets a stony look. "Tea." Bucky refutes calmly.

The engineer grumbles a little, but drinks it without further complaint.

It's right as he's leaving, does Bucky ask him. "The reason you forgave me so fast," He says, looking down intently at the mug in his hands, "It's because of what happened to him, isn't it?" He doesn't need to say his name Tony to know who he's talking about.

Tony's face goes slack for a second in surprise. His eyebrows raise slightly, and he fidgets with the string of the tea bag. "A little," He admits. "More like...it helped put things into perspective. I guess I never really thought about how it affected you." He pauses. "Fuck, that sounds horrible."

"Not really." Bucky says with a shrug.

Tony looks dubious, but continues. "It made me realize, I guess, that you weren't the perpetrator. Made me realize," He takes a long sip of his tea, and as his gaze meets Bucky's, there's something terribly knowing in his eyes. "That you were really just the first victim."

Tony's words stick with him the entire day. He's running them through his head, even now, as he's sitting on the couch, idly watching the news. Percy is sitting on the other couch, his earbuds in as he works.

Bucky always assumed he was listening to music, or something. He now infers that it's most likely some sort of text-to-speech software. Once more, he curses himself for not seeing it earlier.

How he hid it...Bucky has no clue. It's becoming increasingly apparent that Percy has more talents than Bucky gave him credit for. And since the moment he'd met him, Bucky had given him a shitload of credit.

Still thinking of the depth of Tony's gaze, he speaks up. "Hey, Percy?" It's the first time Bucky has said his forename aloud, and the way it rolls off his tongue feels both familiar and foreign.

The man hums in response, taking out his earbuds.

Bucky doesn't look over at him, keeping his gaze up on the ceiling. "About what you said earlier, about those agents in Ontario not deserving it? You know you didn't either, right? You had less choice in the matter than they did."

Percy blinks, clearly caught off guard. "Maybe," He conceded, voice terribly faint.

Thursday, August 7th

3:04 PM

WSC Chamber, NY

They drew straws for who got to go.

Well, for who got to go alongside Lee, more accurately. Nobody was willing to look him in the eyes and deny him this trip.

In the end, it was Aspen who won. They'd barely spoken a word since the hearing; face set in a stone mask. Walking just a beat behind Lee like the wraith they'd chosen their codename for, step in step.

The two of them had ridden in silence, all the way back to the Council building. Not a word exchanged, all the way out of the parking lot, into the building, and up the stairs to one of the security offices.

But not the monitor room. Even if it was cleaned up, which Aspen wasn't fully sure it was, they didn't think they could stomach going in there. From what Mal said, it sounded gruesome, and there was no way Lee should be going back in there either.

The chief of security was sitting, waiting for them. Lee didn't even greet him, sitting down without a word, and Aspen followed suit.

In a strange sort of synchronicity, they both leaned in, staring the chief down until he started to sweat a little. Normally, Aspen would want to laugh a little at this sort of situation; they'd read up on the security chief—a former Navy SEAL for more than two decades, before this.

But if the look on Lee's face was reflected even the slightest on Aspen's, they supposed he had good reason to be nervous.

"Nick Hodgins," Lee starts off slowly, as if savoring every word that falls loose of his lips.

"Yes, we identified him as soon as we saw his face. We've got the best of the best working on it —" He starts. Aspen raises a single brow and he falls silent.

Lee continues as if he didn't speak at all. "I want you to explain to me," He says, leaning in ever so slightly, "How you and your people are so overwhelmingly *incompetent* that an armed lunatic

made it into the center of the WSC chamber itself?”

The chief swallowed.

Thursday, August 7th

3:52 PM

Stark Tower, NY

Percy rubbed a hand over his face, biting down hard on the inside of his cheek to keep his face neutral. “Alright,” He murmured into the phone. “I’ll be there soon.”

Tony looked up. “What’d he say?” Bucky, too, looked up from his book, curious.

With a sigh, Percy made his way around the couch, dropping down on it. He folded his hands together, bracing his forearms across his knees. “The WSC guards are divided into squads, with about ten people each. Every squad is assigned a certain quadrant, and while they rotate through spots in their quadrant, they always stay in the same area. The group around the chamber was the best of the best, all their backgrounds checked out.”

Percy cracked the knuckle on his first finger, deep in thought. “It took a bit of...pressure, to get it out of the chief, but he eventually cracked. Turns out, one of the squad members called in sick last minute. Very, very last minute. And everyone else had gotten their debriefings already, so they didn’t want to reassign anybody. Instead, he made the call to put a new hire in that spot, and didn’t mention it to anybody.”

Bucky blinked. “Are you serious?”

“Unfortunately. Said new hire’s name is Adeline Hirra, and she’s as shady as they come. Echo and Wraith tracked her down. She’s in custody.” Percy took a deep breath. “And the guy who called in sick last minute? Wraith dropped by his house to interview him. Guy was laying dead on his living room carpet.” He grimaces. “Most of him, at least.”

“I’m a little scared to ask.”

“His head was missing, Tony.”

Tony sucked in a sharp breath. “Jesus Christ,” He muttered. “So we were right. Inside job.”

Percy nodded. “It appears so.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry, James. We should have caught it earlier.”

Bucky shook his head. “Not your fault,” He said, subdued. “You guys aren’t the pieces of shit who want my head.” He stared at the floor, face drawn, then slid a bookmark into the open pages on his lap. “I’m...I’m gonna get some air.” He muttered, dropping his book on the couch and walking out of the common room.

Tony watched him go with a frown, but turned back to Percy, gesturing for him to continue.

Percy looked like he was swallowing down a lemon, but he nodded. “Dan’s out of surgery. He hasn’t woken up yet, but...It’s not looking good. They can’t tell anything yet, but it’s a miracle if he’ll have full mobility.”

“Christ,” Tony whispered. “How are the others?”

“Honestly?” Percy shook his head. “They’re coping. Mal’s been having some issues, but she’s working through it. It’s Lee I’m most worried about. He and Dan have been friends for years. They’re close.”

“I didn’t know that,” Tony murmured, brow pinched together.

“They met at the SHIELD academy. Friends ever since.” He pressed a fist to his mouth. “You know, after the file dump, they both showed up to my apartment? I’d already quit by then, but I let them in anyways. They weren’t in great shape. People were after them. I helped them get into hiding, somewhere safe.”

His voice dropped to a barely audible level. “I knew when I asked Lee to join, he’d say yes. And I knew where he goes, Dan follows.” He let out a quivering breath. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

Thursday, August 7th

7:23 PM

Stark Tower, NY

Bucky didn’t let his gaze drift from the edge of the horizon, watching the sun dip low behind the city. It was getting steadily colder as the sun took its leave, nipping at Bucky’s exposed skin. He tried his best not to focus too much on it; cold led to frozen and frozen led to ice, and he’d be in cryo again, waking up to Vasily Karpov standing over him, because they were always standing *over him*—

He exhaled, watching it cloud white as it curled away from his lips.

Maybe he was coping. That’s why he’d been standing in the same spot for what was probably hours. Listening to the distant sounds of the city down under, trying his best to notice every shade of the sunset.

Being shot at wasn’t new. What came after, though? That was about as new as it gets for him, these days.

Percy Jackson was...well, he seemed to defy every single expectation Bucky had of him. The good soldier who turned out to be a blind man desperately hiding his Enhancement, who tried so hard to not care but never really could. Bucky could tell the exact moment when Percy’s walls just seemed to collapse.

Right when he accepted Bucky’s secure grip on his shoulder, when he wiped at his eyes and told Bucky what actually happened to him in Ontario.

One other thing kept staring himself right in the face. Chris Graves’s voice, saying the word *asset*

over, and over again. His voice joined thousands of others, young and old, innocent and the damned.

Behind him, knuckles rapped on the balcony door. He wiped at his face before turning around.

Percy stood in the doorway, the wind ruffling his hair and shirtsleeves. "It's late," He said in lieu of greeting. "You've been out here for hours. You should get some rest. It's been a long couple of days." He gently prodded. "Go to sleep."

Bucky leaned his back against the railing, looking up at the night sky. "Are you?"

The other man paused for a second, then gave a slight laugh, shaking his head. "No." He admitted. "I've got to go to work. I just woke up from a Tony-mandated nap, though."

He raised an eyebrow. "You don't look it." Because while it was true Percy had a major case of bedhead, the circles under his eyes almost matched the color of the feathery pieces of hair sticking up in every direction on his head.

Percy's shoulders slumped slightly, and he stepped fully outside, moving to lean against the balcony next to Bucky. He, too, tilted his face up towards the sky, but his eyes were closed, feeling the wind's gentle breath against his skin. "Sleep's never been that restful for me," He said after a second. "I get these...dreams, sometimes."

"Nightmares?"

"No. Well, yes, but," His face pulled into a distant look, his voice carrying something unidentifiable. "Sometimes, the things I dream aren't just that. They happen in real life."

Bucky abandoned his focus on the inky sky to stare at Percy. "Prophetic dreams?" He echoed, brow raised.

Percy shrugged a shoulder. "Yeah. Sometimes stuff that hasn't happened yet. Sometimes just stuff that's happening, or already passed. Mostly the future. I thought it'd be useful, at first." He shook his head. "It's awful." His voice dropped, and, for some reason, Bucky got the feeling Percy had never actually expressed this part aloud. "Most of the time, I can't distinguish the prophecies from the nightmares."

His inhale was sharp. Bucky had his fair share of terrors that he saw as he slept. Old memories that he knew would never leave him, and, more recently, he dreamed of snapping, of turning back into the Soldier, of getting used to the feeling of necks snapping under his bloody, bloody hands, once more.

Having those nightmares, and there being a chance that it was a glimpse of the future...

Without even speaking, he found himself quickly shaking his head. "God," He rasped. "That—that sounds awful. How long has this been...?"

Maybe it was just a trick of his mind, but Percy somehow looked even more tired now. That bone deep weariness that looked etched into his skin, like the carving of marble. "As long as I remember."

And Bucky just stared. Stared at Percy like he was really understanding him for the first time. A man who would never be able to truly relax. Even in his sleep, he was tormented with visions of the future.

"The balance of nature decrees that a super-abundance of dreams is paid for by a growing potential for nightmares." Bucky found himself echoing. "Peter Ustinov said that."

Percy dipped his chin. "Well," He said with a humorless chuckle, "I've certainly got an abundance of dreams." His smile wasn't as nice as ones Bucky had seen previously. He pushed himself off the railing and shoved his hands in his pockets. "I've got to go. But really, James. Try to sleep, just a little?"

"Fine," Bucky relented. "I'll try."

He received a smile. Much better, this one was.

FRIDAY had bid him both Percy's goodbye and Bucky's goodnight over an hour ago. Maybe it was Rhodey, Percy, Peter, and Pepper's combined influence of his life, but Tony wanted to sleep. He wanted to, but he knew he wouldn't be able to.

He'd gotten his hands on Dan's medical files last night, and he couldn't stop thinking.

The situation reminded him way too much of Rhodey. Of standing in this exact spot, surrounded by mugs of coffee that had long devolved into room temperature, staring at medical reports until his eyes blurred.

Because braces wouldn't fix this. Braces couldn't support Dan's whole body the way they did his friend's legs. Rhodey would get better with therapy, too. Maybe not quite where he was before the accident, but he'd get *better*.

And staring at the projected image of Dan's nervous system, he knew that there was no hope for Percy's tech support.

Tony Stark had always had a thing for impossible solutions.

He wanted to go to bed. But he knew until he started, his brain just wouldn't turn off. It'd result in nothing but a headache.

He rubbed a hand over his face and started grabbing tools.

His work, despite the complexity, was mindless. It was to destress, to let the tension of his muscles leave him. Lab time was to bask in the silence, to just let him *breathe*. Tony loved being around the important people in his life; movies with Rhodey and lunches with Pepper, building with the Spider-ling and chatting with Percy.

Tony liked being with people.

He also liked being alone, sometimes. Alone, but never lonely. Not anymore.

Right now, one of the many things occupying his mind was Percy. Specifically, in the context of

Barnes.

Percy telling Barnes about Ontario had been surprising. He was shocked, extremely so, at first. But then Tony took a step back, and looked at it from another angle.

It'd make sense, actually, for it to be easier to talk about with Barnes. While the contexts were different, they both understood being made to hurt people.

Tony knew that Percy hated lying. He also knew that life was cruel, especially to Percy, so, of course, lying was one of the things he had to do most often. So while Barnes didn't know he was a demigod—which was probably for the best, actually,—being able to be open about his disability, and, in turn, his abilities would be good for him.

Enhanced was an umbrella term, anyways.

Before Tony gently bullied him into taking a nap earlier, he'd asked him, trying to understand Percy's change of heart. "Aren't you worried?"

"You'll have to be more specific," Percy had said dryly.

Tony rolled his eyes, but quickly sobered up. "About losing him. About him going back to Hydra. About having to...to kill him."

And he watched as Percy's troubled expression hardened. "I guess he'll just have to make it, then. The Soldier isn't coming back; not if I have anything to say about it. James Barnes isn't dying." He said it with such a sense of finality, that, despite their chances having long since dwindled to a knife point, he believed him.

"You're sure?"

And, if Tony didn't know Percy better, he could've sworn that he was looking straight at him. "He's going to make it."

bucky 100% is that bitch who reads a lot and pulls philosophical quotes out of his ass
and i will die on this hill

pov lee and aspen finding a headless body on the living room carpet of some guy's
house:

recently i've seen a lot of backlash online on the pjo show casting, specifically leah
jeffries as annabeth. and i doubt it's any of you guys, cause yall are sweethearts, but
just figured i'd give a friendly reminder that if anyone has a problem with her, they can
meet me out back <3

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Hospital Rooms

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Friday, August 8th

9:34 AM

New York Presbyterian Hospital, Queens

When Dan woke up, he knew something was wrong.

He felt like he was floating, miles away from the ground. His head submerged in water, muffling all sounds around him. Everything smelt sharp, stinging his nose.

It was cold.

He drifted. Wandering in and out of whatever state he was in. Sometimes he heard noises, all too garbled to make sense. Other times, there was beeping. Pressure on his chest, something cold in the crook of his elbow, sending numbness up into his shoulder and then spreading through the rest of his body.

Everything changed, but it was always cold, sinking down into the water under the lake's frozen top, the light getting further and further away.

Just enough to bother him, when he was aware of it. To make him want to move, to find something thick to bundle himself under, to go outside, because he clung to the distant memory of it being hot out.

He was always cold.

Except, sometimes, his hand. His right hand, unlike every other inch of his skin, was warm. Something would close around it, rough and familiar, driving away the chill, even if it was just that one spot.

Sometimes, it crept up his wrist and forearm, but never further. Eventually, it would stop, and he would plunge back into the freezing water.

He grasped onto those moments, that memory of a firm grip, riding on the waves of that warmth until it brought him to the surface.

Dan placed the smell as antiseptic. That edged scent, pulling him back to his body like it always did, ever since the file dump. Though it was years ago, he still remembered it like it was yesterday. The screaming, the shooting, the loud *bang* as his front door imploded. The armed squad that came in, guns blazing.

Like it was yesterday, he remembered Lee standing over him, grabbing him and shaking his shoulders, them running, using each other as they only support they had, breaking open the padlock on the side door of a warehouse, blood trailing after their dragging feet.

Clear as day, he could remember her face, wide eyed and shaky in a way that was painfully new, her hands clutching the side of her neck. Antiseptic smell, as she walked him through stitching her up when her own hands were too shaky to do it herself.

Dan had never liked blood. It was one of the reasons he didn't mind staying behind, alone in an empty room full of computers. He saw pictures, some of the most gruesome things conceivable. Those, he could get desensitized to. Those were just pixels on a screen.

It was different, in person.

Knowing that it was happening right in front of you, that it wasn't something that had already come to pass.

His hands had been fluttery, a gag being continuously forced down as he had stared at her.

He'd threaded the needle, eyes never leaving her face.

That same stinging scent that had once roughly yanked him out of panic to help his friend, now tugged him to the surface.

He opened his eyes only the tiniest bit possible. It was bright, fluorescent white lights hanging above him. Dan groaned and turned his head to the side.

Everything was dull in color, overlapping in shades of eggshell and linen, melting and blending into one. He only realized he'd fallen half back into his sleep when his attention was caught, snapping him back into the world of the living.

Across his IV-free arm, spanning from his fingertips to just below his elbow, bright markings were scattered. In a myriad of colors, from neon sun-yellows to darkest purples, leafy greens and ocean-rich blues and every shade in between, outlines of black and highlights in startling white. They all spiraled up his arm and across his skin, every centimeter painstakingly and carefully drawn.

Dopey and numb as it was, he smiled. Even in the state he was, he could recognize those meticulous designs; the bright colors and shapes, the bold lines and the wispy curves.

Had known those lines since his years at the SHIELD science academy, fresh out of college and twiddling his thumbs in an empty classroom, the lecture long since ended. Staring at the sharpie pen in between his braced elbows, trying desperately to recall the name of the lender.

Dan had spent almost an hour tracking her down. When he'd finally appeared, out of breath in the doorway of her dorm room, she'd just raised an eyebrow over the top of the textbook in her hands. "I said you could keep it."

He'd flushed bright red, she'd laughed, and the rest was history.

The point was, Dan knew those little doodles that always inevitably turned into a full sleeve of artwork, and he smiled.

Smiled, and lets his eyes flutter closed, finally feeling the warmth deep in his chest instead of just on one arm.

It's easier, the next time. He still feels numb and confused, but still warm, both in his chest and especially in his right hand once more. When he does look, it's Lee, her chunky headphones on, an open pouch of every shade of marker known to man open on the nightstand. He can hear the music playing faintly—a quiet orchestral score.

Her hand is intertwined with his own, holding him steady as she inks a network of swirls on his knuckles.

She looks tired. Her hair is tugged back in a way he knows she's been running her hands through it over and over. The circles under her eyes contrast violently against her pale skin, making her look akin to a corpse.

Though he's sure he doesn't make a sound, her eyes flit up towards him in an instant. She doesn't look surprised to see him awake. Her eyes hold that familiar quiet assessment, looking at him the way she did everything—like the world was a piece of art hanging in a gallery, open for her to interpret anyway she wished. She gives him a little nod in the way that she does, then finishes coloring in the little section of fushia on his pointer finger.

After that, she gestures with her chin up, towards the left, by the door.

With a bit of effort, Dan turns his head, to see Tony Stark standing above his bed.

“Hey, Campbell,” The Futurist himself greets. “Want to become a cyborg?”

Friday, August 8th

11:04 AM

Stark Tower, NY

Percy looks like the weight of the world has been taken off him when he sits down at the dining table. His shoulders, unwaveringly tense for the last few days, finally seem to have loosened up.

He's holding two plates, each with a sandwich cut in meticulous triangles. Bucky's lips twitch upwards. It's just something so *Percy*, right up there with doing his dog's hair and owning far too many colorful socks.

“Thanks,” He said as Percy puts one of the plates in front of him. He waves off the gratitude,

instead leaning forward.

“Dan woke up.” Percy says with a grin, eyes crinkling. He doesn’t say that Dan is okay, that there’s no permanent damage, just that he *woke up*, and that seems like enough. It has to be. Bucky knows that much.

“I’m glad.” Bucky says in return.

“Me too. Now,” He says, swallowing down a mouthful of bread. “We just got to find the bastards responsible.”

Bucky picks at the pile of potato chips in front of him. “What do you know so far?”

“With both Hodgins and the original guard dead, it’s a bit difficult.” The flash of guilt on Percy’s face is so obvious, so easy to read, it sends Bucky reeling. “Adeline Hirra, the one who helped Hodgins, is in the wind. We can’t find a single trace of her, which is...” He scrunches his nose. “Odd. FRIDAY is helping us out, and the Stark satellites are the best in the business. We’ve checked everywhere she could’ve gone, but,” He sighs. “It just makes no sense, James.”

Bucky sighs, leaning back in his own seat. “I’ve been thinking that a lot lately.”

Percy huffs out a short laugh. “Yeah, me too. I mean, first we had a Hydra offshoot who would say stuff about a new world order, then we got a bunch of trafficked kids, and now someone’s trying to kill you?” He rubs his temples. “I just...I don’t see how it’s connected.”

“Where do you think Hirra could be?”

He rests his chin in his hand. “There’s a chance she could be holed up in some bunker, somewhere. Hiding.” He extrapolates.

“Maybe,” Bucky agrees. “Or maybe she’s dead.”

Percy blinks, cocking his head to the side. “I hadn’t considered that,” He says.

Bucky shrugs. “Just an idea. But we know Hydra is related to this, somehow, and with them...” His voice turns dark. “Once you’ve fulfilled your use, you’re just a loose end.” He stares down at his plate. “And they don’t do loose ends.”

That’s what Bucky was, now. A liability.

To Hydra, yes, but also to everyone else. He knew things he shouldn’t, things that could help bring Hydra to their knees. He could be the torch set against the monster’s neck. But, in turn for what he had on them, Hydra’s grip on him was unrelenting.

Percy’s face sours slightly, mouth pinched. “I’ll start checking morgues.” He says quietly, choosing not to comment on the weight behind Bucky’s words. He appreciates it. “I just don’t know what we’re missing. It has to be something big.”

When he’s silent for a long moment, Bucky looks up at him. Percy’s brow is furrowed, face deeply in thought. When he speaks, his voice is slow, measured. “And for the life of me, I can’t shake the feeling that whatever it is, it’s right in front of my face.” Percy shakes his head, as if trying to physically dispel the thought, and takes a bite of his lunch.

So quiet Bucky almost misses it, he adds, “I just hope we find out what it is before it’s too late.”

Friday, August 8th

11:04 AM

New York Presbyterian Hospital, Queens

The entirety of SWORD is waiting for him when Percy strides through the doors. “Sorry I was late,” He begins, but stops short. Dan is sitting up, his heart sluggish and his breathing weak, but he’s sitting up. For just a second, Percy abandons the facade he long since adopted, and moves forward and envelops the agent in a strong hug.

Dan makes a slightly shocked noise, but after a second lets out a heavy breath, relaxing in his hold.

When Percy pulls back, he whispers, quiet enough that nobody else can hear it, “*I’m so sorry.*”

Before he can even think about it, Percy’s powers are reaching out, desperately scanning across Dan’s body. And while he was no doctor, Percy had spent painstakingly long hours studying the different parts of the body, trying to place a name to the things he could feel.

Percy knew what a cervical nerve injury felt like.

The knowledge weighs him down, pressing hard on his shoulders. He tunes back into the conversation with a jolt, violently tearing his attention away from Dan. The unconscious act of using his abilities on that level made him queasy.

The room smells like sharp anesthetic, like a thousand dulled needles prickling into his brain. For a fraction of a second, he thinks of that lab, his limbs strapped down, a figure looming over him—

He clenches his fist so hard his nails bite deep into his palm. Now is *not* the time for this. He inhales slowly, and tries his best to match up the pattern with Lee’s reliably steady one.

It’s one of the nicer private rooms, no doubt Tony’s doing. He reminds himself to thank the man later. Besides the bed, there’s a scattering of plush chairs, a small table, and a tall fern in the corner.

Bridgette’s twiddling her thumbs, an act that makes her seem bored, but he knows it’s an anxious tic. Aspen is sitting next to her, deathly silent, eyes hawk-like as they watch the other occupants. Ross is standing near the foot of his bed, arms wrapped tightly around himself. Mal stands near him, presence distinctly more hovering.

Lee remains on his right side, while Dr. Cho and Tony stand on his left.

Mal sniffs from her spot. “Are you sure?” It’s not directed at any of them, but at Dr. Cho, who glances regretfully down at the chart in her hand. The woman nods. “Yes,” She says regretfully. “That kind of damage...it’s the kind that won’t fix itself.”

The weight those words bare down on the room is crushing.

Dan's posture doesn't change, which doesn't surprise Percy. But his voice sounds broken. "Right," He murmurs.

Lee, once more, takes his limp hand. She's holding a marker, a pleasant shade of royal blue, and is making interlocking loops on his wrist. Dan looks at it, tracking the movement with his eyes, and Percy knows that he's barely holding it together because he can't feel the light pressure at all.

Bridgette covers her mouth with one hand, her breathing shaky. "There's nothing we can do?"

Dr. Cho opens her mouth, then hesitates, looking towards Tony. The man clears his throat. "Well, not typically. But, I might just have something. It's not a guarantee, but it's a chance."

Everyone's heads snap up to look at him. Aspen's eyes are narrowed in apprehension, and Lee's pale eyes seem to be staring straight into Tony's soul.

"It's a chance." Dan echoes.

Tony is looking at their tech expert with unadulterated sorrow. "Yes."

Silence reigns for a long minute. Percy aches, because Dan always gets fidgety in situations like this. But now, he can barely even move his neck.

When Dan looks up, there's a resolute hardness in his gaze, one that's not typically associated with him. "Do it."

The conviction in his voice strikes a cord in Percy. Though the situation couldn't be more different, the surety in his tone reminds him, just a little bit, of his family. He's not sure whether the thought is a pleasant one or not.

Tony raises his eyebrows. "It's experimental. It might not work, it could even make things worse. Nanotech is a completely new field—"

“I can’t move my limbs, Dr. Stark. I—” He chokes off. “ *Please* .”

A beat passes, then Tony nods.

Chapter End Notes

we do be foreshadowing though

dan's alive ig. you guys can calm down

percy and his little triangle sandwiches :) :) :) :)

nobody:

me releasing dan and lee lore: >:)

bucky playlist just dropped:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0T9v5Wx0GoeBnNpak5TLhi?si=dcbd947d87e4475a>

that, and all the other ones, are on my spotify, @denimbeans

you can also find me, my art, and facts about wombat hair care, on insta

@beansofdenim

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Subject C-4

Chapter Notes

whats this??? an update in the middle of the week? for pride month???

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The first time Wade met Percy, he'd been relaxing on top of a rooftop ledge, watching the city below and tearing into a takeout container of tacos.

He heard the roof access door open behind him, of course, but didn't bother to move. They were some damn good tacos—he was in the zone, alright? A pair of light footsteps grew closer, then stopped, right behind him.

“Mind if I sit?”

The voice was accented; definitely a New York native right there, and had a certain low, rasping quality. Wade hummed. “I’m not sharing my tacos.” *Wow*, the salsa on these was really good. Maybe if Wade tried hard enough, he could get the recipe. He was getting a little thirsty, though. He'd forgotten to get a drink.

“That’s fair,” The man sat down next to him, setting his backpack on the concrete to his other side. Once Wade finished his last taco, he sighed, a tad melodramatic, and put the empty styrofoam on down.

It was silent for a long minute, before the tell-tale crack of a soda tab met his ears. He looked to his right for the first time, but before he could even say anything, the stranger was handing him an ice-cold cherry vanilla Coke.

Wade gasped. “Oh-em-gee, I was *just* thinking about one of those!”

The stranger’s lips twitched upwards, and he took a sip of his own.

It was a good soda. If Wade wasn't mistaken, it was *blue*, which he didn't even know was possible, but it added a certain *something*.

The emojis are a nice touch, right?

He guzzled down half the can before speaking. “So,” Wade drawled out, “Who sent you?”

The stranger took a long sip. “SHIELD.”

“Oooh, you got stuck with Deadpool Duty, huh? What'dya do?” Wade sang.

“Told Fury to suck my dick.”

It took very little to surprise Wade, alright? But one of Fury’s little yes-men getting him a snack, telling the truth, and then revealing they’d insulted the big man himself? It was gasp-worthy. “You,” Wade said seriously, “Are doing God’s work.”

“I try,” The man said dryly. When he spoke, he turned to Wade a little, finally giving him a glimpse of his face.

Dude was hot. Hella jawline, nice lips, dark hair, and those *cheekbones*, goddamn. A pair of sunglasses were perched on his nose, and the slight breeze ruffled the collar of his windbreaker. Sexy as hell and brought strangely colored soda? That’s the whole package, right there.

He stuck out his hand. “I’m Percy.”

“I’m Wade, but you can call *me* cupcake.”

Percy laughed. Of course, he had a nice laugh, too. “Right,” He said. Holy Jesus, he had dimples, too. What a face to remember. Hey, *wait* , speaking of which—

“Are you a baby SHIELD-ling?”

“Sure, I suppose. Got hired two months ago, about.” His mouth twisted. “I detest that name,

though, *cupcake* .”

... *Damn*. Maybe Wade could get him to try out Daddy, next. He cleared his throat. “Shady government agency not all you were hoping for?”

“You say that assuming I had expectations.”

Wade hummed. “So, what’re you supposed to do? Bring me into custody?” He challenged. He hoped not. As much as he would like this guy to restrain him, escaping custody for the 134th time would be a little annoying. Plus, he *really* didn’t want to risk messing up this guy’s face.

“Ideally. But would you look at that. I’m incapacitated.” Percy said, very much not incapacitated.

“Ah, I see. You were woefully outmatched. Couldn’t be helped.”

“Really couldn’t. As a pity-prize for being beaten so thoroughly, would you tell me the name of the leader of that trafficking ring you descended upon yesterday, so I can go lick my wounds?”

Wade smiled a little. Like, actually, genuinely smiled. He didn’t even know his rotten avocado face could still *do* that. “Guy’s name was *Ronald*. When I asked where Harry and Hermione were, he *shot* me, can you believe that?”

Percy tutted. “Some people,” He said, shaking his head. “Thanks for the tip, though, Wade.”

Wade winked. “Any time, sweetums.”

With a final laugh, Percy pushed himself up, slung his back back over his shoulder, and stepped away from the ledge. He gave Wade a short wave before heading towards the stairwell.

“See you soooooon~” Wade sang after this.

His new friend seemed to find this very funny. “Sure,” He said before disappearing down into the building.

Wade did see him again. Not for a while, but boy, when he did...

He'd been hired to take out some mob-type douchenozzle, and was currently making his way into said shitstain's base. It had been a pretty good day; he'd gotten some skittles from a vending machine, the weather was nice, and he hadn't even gotten shot so far.

Wade turned a corner to find Percy hanging upside down via a chain on his ankles. The man's arms were crossed, even in this position, and he looked decidedly unamused. As soon as he set foot in the room, Percy's head tilted to the side like a puppy. "Wade?"

"Hi," Wade said, slowly circling the dangling agent. "This," He said slowly, "Is not the way I would have preferred to see you tied up."

To his surprise, instead of snapping at him, Percy gave a good natured laugh. "Right. Well,—” He suddenly cut himself off, brow furrowing. Then, hissed low, “ *Hide* .”

Wade opened his mouth to object, but then he heard the footsteps. And, typically, Wade didn't listen to random people, but maybe whoever was coming would know where to find his dearest target. He really didn't feel like searching the whole building.

He took a few steps back, then to the side, standing behind a conveniently placed stack of crates. The man that stormed in was, well, a mess. And not even a hot one. He was short and built like a cinder block, down to the mashed in, square face. He was a furious shade of purple, spittle flying as he yelled in a language Wade didn't know.

He got nice up close and personal with Percy, too, shouting just a few inches from the man's face. To his credit, though, Percy didn't even flinch, just occasionally nodding along to his words. When the man *finally* paused to take a breath , Percy spoke. It was short, clipped. Sounded like a question.

The man was caught off guard, spluttering something. Percy, who looked like he'd been listening, rolled his eyes in a way that said he was done. "This is your guy, Wade." He said in English.

Wade shrugged and stepped out of the shadows. Sure looked like the guy, alright. And if it wasn't...well, anybody associated with this place was probably a bad guy. Plus, he'd spit in his new friend's eyes. Nasty.

Katana in hand, he turned to Percy. “You’re...not gonna stop me?”

Percy gave an upside down shrug. “I didn’t see shit.” He said it so calmly, too.

Well. That settles it, then.

Decapitation was messy, but it sent a message, which is exactly what he was being paid to do. He wiped the blood on the newly deceased’s jacket, then turned to Percy, then squinted up at the dark ceiling. Wherever the chain came from, it was up high—he and Percy were about eye level. The least he could do is free him, anyways. Payment for the soda.

He was very surprised and slightly aroused when Percy, instead of asking him to cut the chain or something, crunched his body upwards, hands grabbing the chain from where it hung above his ankles— *holy core body strength, Batman* —in one smooth motion. From there, he climbed upwards like some sort of beefy spider-monkey, until he reached the top. Wade squinted as he heard metallic screeching, and then a loud clang.

Immediately followed by a loud crash as Percy fell to the floor, most definitely bruised but decidedly free.

Huh.

They got ice cream, after that, in case you were wondering.

In the months following, they ran into each other more and more often. It was...well, it was nice. Wade never thought he’d ever be able to consider a SHIELD agent a friend, but as cliché as it sounded, Percy was different.

“I don’t give a rat’s ass about the government,” Percy had idly commented while taking a bite out of a churro. “I just joined up to keep aliens from trying to fuck up the planet again.”

“A noble cause.” Wade said with a grin.

But when Percy responded, it lacked his usual cheer. “Glad someone thinks so.”

After a mission that went south—well, almost south, but not quite. Very close. A strong south-leaning southwest. Yeah. That sounded better.

After the mission gone south-adjacent southwest, they exchanged phone numbers. Percy wasn’t able to answer often, but that was alright, because he always listened to Wade’s rambling voicemails about the dogs he saw on the street.

Over time, SHIELD changed him. For the worse, Wade thought.

Percy got...drained. Less cheerful. More somber, colder. It was hard to spot when he was with Wade, but it was definitely there. In the way he no longer tensed at gunshots, how impassive his face stayed when they received confessions of sins that would be better off not spoken of. Slowly, as time went on, Percy started acting like the world balanced on top of his shoulders, slowly pushing him into the ground.

Wade asked, only once.

Percy had leaned back against the concrete wall and sighed. “I never wanted to kill people, Wade.” His voice held a certain note of vulnerability that SHIELD, if allowed, would stomp right out of him. “The first time I did, it was because it was right. He was a horrible, horrible man and the world is better off. But killing people for SHIELD? It’s...I know not all of it’s right. But I do it. Because with SHIELD, I know about stuff. Stuff that makes sure I won’t get caught off guard like with the Chitauri.” Percy settled his chin over his crossed arms. “Does that make me selfish?”

“I don’t think so. You don’t seem very selfish to me.” Wade had replied, surprised by the raw honesty in his voice.

The next time they ran into each other, it was freezing November. Percy had a new scar, running up the side of his forearm. They’d been standing over a body when Percy tugged him close. “There’s something wrong,” He whispered, like he was scared someone was listening. “SHIELD. Something’s really, really wrong, Wade.” The fear in his voice was unmistakable.

Percy stopped popping up on SHIELD ops, after that. Wade was so close to waltzing into Fury’s office and demanding answers at gunpoint when he got the call. It wasn’t a saved number—rather, a completely new one.

“Hey, Wade.” Percy’s voice was unmistakable. “We need to talk.”

And talk they did. On a random rooftop in Chicago, to be precise. “I was right,” Percy opened with. “SHIELD. I was getting close to something, and my teammates tried to off me. Got close, too. Lost my phone.” He said, apologetic.

Wade’s vision went red. “*Who?*”

Percy just shook his head. “I—Wade, it doesn’t matter. You hear me? It doesn’t matter. SHIELD isn’t SHIELD, Wade. It’s Hydra. It always has been. I don’t know how deep, but it’s deep enough. Be careful, alright?” He tossed a look over his shoulder. “I can’t stay long. I’m sorry.”

Thanks to the heads up, Wade avoided some very unsavory contracts. He cut all ties with anyone associated with SHIELD, because, despite their talks about laws and procedure, nobody was as above hiring him as they pretended to be. And who knows what was going on behind the curtain for whatever they wanted.

When the file dump happened not even a month later, Wade was frantic. The files on Percy—whose full name was Perseus, apparently—disappeared almost as soon as they showed up. Which was good, except he still had no idea where his friend was.

Two days of being worried sick before Percy called him. His voice was thick, like he’d been crying. “Hey, Wade.”

“Where are you?” He said in lieu of greeting. “You sound upset. Where are you?”

As soon as the location left his lips, Wade was packing up his stuff. An hour later, he was sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with Percy while the man’s shoulders held in tremors. It was silent for a long time, what felt like an hour before he spoke up.

“I had to erase all ties to my family,” Percy whispered. “I, I know it’s just a name, and it doesn’t *really* matter, but, legally, I don’t have anyone. I’m...” He wiped at his nose. “On paper, I’m completely alone.”

Wade looked at him for a long moment. Then, he slung an arm around his shoulder. “Good thing you aren’t IRL though, huh?”

They were fairly close, if you asked Wade. If you asked Percy, he'd probably say the same. Despite it all, Wade had never fully taken off his mask in front of Percy. The last thing he needed was to scare away his friend for good.

Things changed a couple months later. His phone buzzed, and Wade didn't bother checking who it was. There was only one number in that phone, anyways. "Hi."

"Hi. I'm becoming a mercenary now."

Well. Percy certainly kept things interesting.

When Deathstroke hit the rumor mill, Wade was extremely proud. In contrast to Deadpool, he was quiet, serious, but just as deadly.

Like stated; *rumor* mill. Things got exaggerated, a lot. But when word started popping in about the mercenary who took down twenty men in pitch black darkness, who got tased three times and shook it off like it was nothing, who when they tried to torture a location out of and *fell asleep* during waterboarding—well, Wade started to listen.

The ninth time someone tried to hire Wade to kill Percy, and the two tracked down and dealt with the offending party, did Wade finally voice his suspicions.

"You're Enhanced?"

Percy'd paused in his sip of CapriSun. In a voice so quiet it made Wade's previously assumed dead heart twinge, "Yes."

"Why keep it a secret?"

The ex-agent gave a shrug. "If this all goes south, one day," He murmured. "I'd rather die than get sent to the Raft. They do bad things to people like us, there." And with all the time spent in SHIELD, Wade had no doubt Percy had intimate details of that.

“So, what’s your thing?” Everything he’d heard was so conflicting; but one of them had to be true, at least.

Percy smiled around his straw. “Guess.”

Oh, challenge *accepted*.

Many months passed. Their jobs intersected even more, now—days after work were spent getting takeout, chatting on rooftops, seeing who could spit the pits of the giant cherries Percy’d bought in a Turkish street market further.

It’d started slow, but like a cartoon snowball rolling down a hill, it got big, *fast*. Wade had become acutely aware of just how often he zoned out staring at Percy, how often he automatically smiled whenever he heard his voice, just how quickly he’d torn apart the man who’d stabbed Percy in the side on a hit in Laos.

Falling for the SHIELD agent who’d given him a blue cherry vanilla coke was not in Wade’s planner. Like, at all. Nothing was in his planner, actually, because every square inch was covered in stickers.

He tried his best to avoid it. He really did. Because the day Percy feels the same is the day hell freezes over, and even if Satan’s playground turned into the North Pole, any feelings would quickly evaporate once Percy caught a glimpse of what was under the mask.

They take down a pair of murderous drug runners in Italy. They stay in the area for a few days; typically a big no-no, but, well, nobody is gonna miss those two. There’s a villa, up in the country, that they rented for the week.

After the deed is done, and Percy is cleaning the blood off his sword, he shrugs. “We paid for a week. I’m getting my week.”

And once Wade sees him that next morning, laying on the terrace, basking in the sun, how could he leave?

Percy belongs here. A nice house by the shore blanketed by constant sun and a light breeze to play with his hair. Where his bronze skin shines and his smiles charm the vendors at the farmer’s

market. (Which it did, by the way. He came back with a half pound of raspberries he didn't pay a cent for, confused as Wade is crazy.)

Wade doesn't belong here. Especially not with somebody like Percy.

Percy's scars are there, no doubt about it. But they are lines of contrast, pale paint splatters across his eyes. His scars are countless tales, stories of places he'd been and people he's met.

Wade's tell one story. A very, very ugly one.

He doesn't belong. But still, when Percy smiles at him and flashes those damn dimples, how can Wade leave before the week is up?

Which inevitably leads to him sitting on the terrace, mask pulled up to his nose, drinking smoothies with the world's other deadliest mercenary, who's doing partner yoga with his pet. (He loves Mrs. O'Leary. Not for a second does Wade really believe she's a dog.)

Fuck, this would be so much easier if Percy was awful. If he wasn't breathtakingly gorgeous on the inside, outside, and backside.

Afterwards, Percy flops down next to him and steals the banana strawberry smoothie right out from under him. He takes a long sip, flicking the little paper umbrella with an idle finger. Wade swallows and looks away.

"Have you made a guess, yet?"

Percy's voice startles him, just a little. "What?"

"You said you'd guess what my Enhancement was. But you never did."

"Oh," Wade hums. "I'd forgotten about that."

That gets him an amused eyebrow raise. "You forgot? Should I be offended?" He jokes.

“I just don’t think of your Enhancement when I first think about you, I suppose. And besides, you know how often I think about you.” The words fell out of his mouth without permission, and he wished he could cram them back in.

That reaction, though, is almost worth it. Percy’s cheeks go pink, his eyes wide, mouth forming a wordless round shape. Then, a smile. “You think about me?” And Wade is suddenly very aware of just how close they are. Not even a foot in between their faces.

He wants to lie, to joke, but, somehow, all that comes out is, “Yes.”

That smile gets a bit wider, and he’s not sure who’s moving closer; him or Percy. “Enough to have a good guess?”

And here, Wade feels a sense of fragility pressed upon the moment. “I...I had one.” He says slowly. “I was going to announce that you had night vision, smug as hell. All the other things I heard seemed impossible.”

Percy tilts his head.

“But now, I know better. Impossible seems to be your middle name.” He’s close, so close, Wade can pick out the minuscule patches of eyelash and brow that are missing. “But seeing in the dark isn’t it.” His hand comes up to the side of Percy’s face, tilting his chin up towards him. “You can’t see at all, can you?”

The nod is tiny, but Wade feels it in his hand. “So that’s why you didn’t freak out when you saw the bottom half of my face,” He realizes.

Percy’s brow furrows. It’s cuter than it should be. “Why would I freak out?”

The self-deprecating smile is easy to wear. “I’m...well, I’m pretty damn ugly.” He shrugs and says it like a fact.

“Wade,” Percy murmurs. “No you’re not.”

“I mean this with no offense, but you aren’t really the right judge of that.”

Percy doesn't laugh. Instead, he's closer, but a few inches away. “I don’t need to see to know that you’re absolutely beautiful, Wade Wilson.”

And Wade freezes. What on earth do you say to that?

Nothing, apparently, because they’re but a centimeter apart, closing the distance between them, and Percy’s lips slot over his.

Later, as the two of them fall into bed together, Wade knows he loves Percy. It’s not romantic love, but it’s love. And the next morning, the other curled up into his side, all mussed hair and sleepy eyes, Percy says the same.

Wade and Percy aren’t in love; but they love each other.

Nothing changes between them, really. Percy still listens to Wade’s voicemails about the random dogs he spots, Wade keeps his phone, the only one he’s consistently used for longer than a year, on him at all times. They share information, they warn each other, they team up and spend time together.

And, yes, the time spent together afterwards is...a little different, but really. Percy still has that warm, round laugh, Wade still cracks jokes that make him double over, they both try every new ice cream flavor they come across.

They’re not dating. They’re together, but not dating.

Neither of them are made to date.

It’s early in the summer when they mutually call it off. They’re laying in bed together, Wade’s arm wrapped around his shoulders, and Percy tells him about Nick Fury’s job offer. At first, Wade holds the vehement opinion that he should tell him to fuck off; but Percy sighs. “I think I’m going to take it. I owe Tony Stark a lot, Wade, whether he knows it or not. I’m not doing this for Fury. I’m doing it for me. I always repay my debts.”

Because Percy is deeply *good* like that, and Wade can't begrudge his choice.

Later, when they're going their separate ways, Percy smiles at him. "I'll call you on my first day, alright?"

And Wade grins. "You better. And if you ever need anything..."

"Just a call away. The same goes for you, alright?"

"Alright."

And still, nothing changes. They're still friends; they were never anything more. Wade loves Percy, Percy loves Wade, and life goes on.

Romance never did have anything to do with it—it was the kind of love that comes from shooting puns at each other while laying under the sun, from elbowing the other in the ribs when they make a dumb joke, from identically gasping when a dog is nearby.

He cares about Percy, more than he ever thought he could.

So when he calls and asks Wade for a favor, he obliges. Digging through all the Hydra stuff he can get his hands on, following the lead Percy gave him.

And Wade's seen a lot of things in his life. Things that keep him up at night, that make him sick to even think about. Things that sometimes just make him want to break down and sob, because how on *Earth* could someone do that to another human?

This...what lays in front of him is somehow worse.

He'd been unraveling this whole thing, tugging on each individual string until he found the hem it comes from. Weeks of work led him here, standing in front of a computer screen, gut clenching.

Subject C-4. At first, he thinks it's some sort of explosive, based on the name. But as he scrolls, he

realizes that C-4 is most definitely a human being, despite how everything is phrased. There's graphs and charts and paragraphs clinically detailing properties, things like bone density and healing factors and blood tests, and Wade almost stabs a hole in the computer right then and there, because as he gets to the portion on abilities, he *knows*.

He knows, all those lazy days shared between them, stemming from their last day in Italy where Percy tugged him down to the little section of empty beach, a wild grin on his face and the wind tousling his hair.

Wade would know Percy Jackson a mile away, and Subject C-4 is without a doubt his friend.

Chapter End Notes

wade time wade time wade time

HAPPY PRIDE MONTH, FUCKERS

'tis june, and i give you percy and wade's friends to sort of lovers arc!!

fury: ill send jackson on deadpool duty. that'll get him in line.

percy:

percy: *befriends deadpool*

fury:

fury: fuck

did i give percy and wade the equivalent of a whirlwind summer romance? fuck yes i did.

and just to clear up anything: there will be no percy/wade in the future. i just thought they'd be cute together, and also they deserve nice things. especially in superhero type stuff, lets normalize having an ex that didn't tragically die or turn evil.

loving reminder you can find me, my art, and all the hot gossip about King Mindaugas of lithuania on my insta - @beansofdenim

once again -- HAPPY PRIDE MONTH!!!

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Nightmares

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Friday, August 8th

9:24 PM

Stark Tower, NY

Bucky was sitting on the couch waiting when Tony came home. The man was dragging his feet, shoulders hunched low. Bucky would've thought something had gone terribly wrong if he hadn't seen the spark in his eyes.

"Ace?" Bucky asked, tilting his head. Tony blinked, brow furrowing for just a second, before nodding. "He's fine. Asleep. We're going to start running tests tomorrow." The beat of confusion was no mystery to Bucky—Tony rarely heard SWORD's agents referred to by their codenames. Percy hadn't told him their real names, and Bucky couldn't blame him. Reducing collateral. Just in case.

"Good." Bucky says quietly. He's been trying not to feel guilty; the logical part of his brain is trying its best to hammer into him that he had nothing to do with Dan getting hurt. But he still can't help thinking; if he hadn't agreed to go testify, there wouldn't have been an assassination attempt, and SWORD would never have been there.

"Where's Percy?"

Bucky startles slightly, looking up. "Oh, he said he had to take care of something."

Tony's brow furrowed. "That's...unlike him. Was it important?"

"I guess."

He gets a tugging frown in response, but Tony sits down across from him without another word. While it's true Bucky hasn't known Percy for long, this really doesn't seem like him, as Tony said. It gets even weirder when Mrs. O'Leary, clearly having heard them talking,

wanders into the common room. She leaps up onto the couch, making herself comfortable against Bucky's side, resting her enormous head on his lap. After a surprised beat of hesitation, he gently scratches her behind the ears.

He really likes Mrs. O'Leary, he decides. He's not quite sure what breed of dog she is—she bears a passing resemblance to a Newfoundland, but she's even bigger. He wouldn't be surprised if she cleared 200 pounds, honestly. Beneath all that fur, he can feel powerful muscles.

It's not really her size that throws him off, though. There's just something about her—the intelligence in her eyes, maybe, or how her fur seems impossibly dark, like all the light was sucked out of one giant furry space.

But she rolls over on the kitchen tile for belly scratches, once trotted into his room and sat next to him after a particularly bad nightmare, and would probably scare the shit out of anyone who looked at Percy the wrong way, so Bucky has no problems with her.

When the elevator doors ding, all three of them looked up. Percy walks in, his hands in his jacket pockets. He doesn't offer some sort of greeting like usual, his face carefully neutral.

Tony raises a brow. "Where have you been, young man?" He says in a mock-stern voice. "It's late."

This whole night is filled with strange behavior. Percy doesn't respond back in kind, he just walks over to the sitting area and drops down in the seat next to Tony. He doesn't even take his shoes or jacket off.

Bucky frowns. "Are you alright?"

Percy opens his mouth like he wants to say something, but it gets lost in his throat, his lips forming into syllables that never make their way out. His tongue darts out to wet his lower lip, and his jaw clicks shut. Then he smiles—the type that showcases his dimples and crinkles his eyes. "Yeah," He says. "I'm great."

Bucky always sleeps fitfully. He remembers, faintly, even as a kid he always was bad at getting uninterrupted rest. It used to be stress, mostly. About his mom, his sister, about Steve. Not that the other man knew this, but Bucky used to lay awake at night, listening to his shallow, weak breathing. All night, just in case there was a stutter, a wheeze, or, God forbid, it stopped.

Ironically, he slept best when he was in Hydra. He couldn't afford to be tired, and he had no reasons to stay awake. If his handler said to sleep, he slept.

Freedom came with many ups, and he would never trade it for the world. But he really missed being able to sleep through the night.

He was sitting in the chamber, up on the stand. The gunman from the balcony leveled his gun right at Bucky's chest. And this time, he smiled. He didn't drop dead.

"Longing. Rusted. Seventeen."

Gasps filled the chamber. He could see it in Tony's face, the pure panic coursing through his veins. The gunman kept going, even as he adjusted his aim.

The crack of a shot, and Hanover was dead, her warm blood splattered across Bucky's face.

"Daybreak. Furnace. Nine."

The barrel of the gun pointed directly down, next. Tony didn't try to move. He just stared directly at Bucky, his eyes dark. "Your fault," The man said, right before crumpling over the table, a bullet lodged through the top of his skull. The papers under his head bled scarlet.

"Benign."

The man started down the stairs to the ground floor.

“Homecoming.”

*Bucky couldn't move. Every muscle was locked up. **Frozen.** He could feel the cryo chamber surrounding him.*

“One.”

He approached the stand, shotgun slung over one shoulder. His face, that pale, drawn face, was inches from Bucky's. He smiled again, all teeth. It was practically a whisper. “Freight car.”

*Bucky blinked, and he was standing in the middle of the floor. The man was long gone. Bucky turned in a slow semicircle, eyes wide. Every single Council member was laying dead, their necks at unnatural angles that he knew all too well. **SWORD**, too, only theirs was more gruesome. Wraith's windpipe crushed, Echo's pale hair stained with his own blood, Tremor's throat slit ear to ear.*

Bucky stumbled forward, hands coming up to his mouth as he gagged.

*They were slick with blood. Not just covered, but **dripping.** It fell from his palms in waterfalls, gushing over the once pristine tiles and flooding outwards. His breathing was coming in short gasps.*

He turned back to the judge's bench, looking for somebody, anybody .

Next to Hanover's limp form, Percy was on the floor, back propped up against the wood paneling. His hands were pressed to his stomach, trying in vain to staunch the flow of scarlet steadily staining his crisp work shirt.

Bucky tripped over his own feet in his haste. He slid to his knees, ignoring the damp feeling coating them.

Percy's heartbeat was sluggish and slow, and his eyes were half lidded. “No,” Bucky whispered. “No, God, I'm so sorry.”

Slowly, the man turned his head towards him. "...James?" He choked out.

"Yeah," Bucky murmured, trembling. "Yeah, it's me."

A slow, languid blink. Then, Percy shook his head. "You should've died in that ravine." He whispered.

Bucky woke up, his hands clutching his stomach, right where Percy had bled out. He yanked himself out of bed, disentangling his legs from the twisted sheets. His breath was coming out in sharp pants, and he was shaking like a leaf.

"Sergeant Barnes?" FRIDAY inquired gently. "What do you need?"

If he thought himself capable of forming words at the moment, he's not sure what he would've said. Instead, he stumbled out of his apartment and down the hall, leaning against the wall every few steps.

He knocked, probably too loud, definitely way too hard.

It wasn't until he heard footsteps behind the door did he calm down, just in the slightest.

The door opens without the slightest creak, just like the rest of the ones in Stark Tower. "H—" Percy's words get interrupted with a yawn. "Hey, James. Whatssgoion?" He mumbles, rubbing his eyes.

Bucky doesn't even answer before Percy seems to know. He's not entirely sure what the man's full abilities are, but he has no doubt that he can just sense something is wrong, in whatever way.

Percy's reaching out and putting a gentle hand on his shoulder before Bucky even blinks,

suddenly more alert. “Why don’t you come in?”

Bucky follows him numbly, hands still shaky. Percy doesn’t let go of him, even for a second, and Bucky wonders for a second if he knows just how much it grounds him.

He gently nudges him onto the couch, and wastes no time sitting next to him. It’s strange seeing him like this; the Percy Jackson that Bucky knows is always put together, standing upright and face neutral. The one break in this pattern had been after the assassination attempt, where Percy had been taken apart in all the wrong ways.

This, though, seems right. He’s wearing loose sweats and a tee, two different colored socks, and Mrs. O’Leary is leaning up against both their legs. While it’s true Percy’s hair never really laid flat, it stuck up in every direction, now, giving him the air of a bleary-eyed cloud.

Mrs. O’Leary gives a yawn of her own and hops up on the couch, choosing to lay next to Bucky with her head on his thighs. She’s asleep in an instant, and Bucky’s hands come up to pet her head on instinct.

Percy leans back against the couch cushion, his eyes half closed. Just for a second, Bucky looks at him and sees blood trickling out of the corner of his mouth. He flinches, and just like that, it’s gone.

The man’s brow furrows. “What happened?”

Bucky opens his mouth in vain, trying to scrape up the words to explain. What eventually comes out is hoarse and terribly quiet. “This...this is real, right? I’m here?”

Percy’s face takes on a sort of devastated understanding. “Yeah, James. You’re here. And you’re fine.”

His nod is a little too fast. “Right,” He breathes.

Another yawn.

“Sorry for waking you up.” Bucky whispers, ears turning red as he calms down slightly. Percy just shrugs, and he feels the movement pressed up against his arm. It’s not a long couch, and Mrs. O’Leary takes up most of it. “It’s fine. Glad you did.”

“Still.”

Percy just gives him a tired deadpan, and Bucky feels a tiny smile slide onto his face despite himself.

“Wake me up if you need me?” Percy checks, eyes already half closed.

“Fine.” He says without thinking. Then, looks down at the giant dog who has slowly migrated across both of their laps in her sleep. He turns to say something about the slight predicament, but Percy is already asleep, curled into the couch.

Bucky debates waking him, just for a second, but decides against it right as Percy’s head hits his shoulder.

He knows Percy sleeps even less than he does, maybe even less than Tony does. He’s heard about the man’s legendary stubbornness, corralling the engineer to bed at extreme measures. Bucky was the one who woke him in the first place—the least he can do is stay still for a few hours.

Once, Hydra sent him on a mission that involved him staying perfectly unmoving for over twenty-four hours, standing up in the blistering heat of the Iranian desert.

He was pretty sure he could handle this, sitting comfortably on a couch in a cozy apartment that smelled faintly like lavender and the sea breeze, a fluffy dog and tired mutant provided a constant warmth that seeped into his bones.

Bucky knew he wouldn’t be able to go back to sleep, himself. Instead, he basked in the freeing silence, only broken by the measured breaths of his two couchmates. If he listened closely, he was fairly sure their breathing patterns matched up perfectly, which had him forcing down a soft laugh.

Exhaling, he let his head tip back. He couldn’t sleep, but he could certainly get some rest.

Keep an eye out over the two, just in case, but mostly allow himself to calm down, to get his thoughts in order, to just *be*.

There were worse ways to spend a night.

Saturday, August 9th

8:05 AM

Stark Tower, NY

Tony was about to lose his shit.

He'd been on the phone with Ross since seven, arguing back and forth in circles. *No*, Tony didn't know where the Rogues were. *Yes*, Barnes used to be in Wakanda, but only him. *No*, Ross could not step one single grimy foot into his tower.

The man kept on screaming through the receiver, calling Tony a filthy liar.

Which...was true, but *still* . Rude. At least when Tony insulted people, he was creative. The only new development in the last twenty minutes had been the sound of spittle hitting the speaker.

Gods, he hated Ross.

(Not to be confused with Percy's SWORD team member, Ross Bunmi, who was a delight in comparison.)

Tony had been slumped over the dining room table, rubbing at his temples with his free hand,

repeating the same mantra over and over. “I don’t know where Rogers is. I’m not helping you find him. Stop screaming.”

“It seems there’s a misunderstanding,” Ross grits out. “You’re not exactly in a position to decline, Stark.”

Oh, it’s getting *interesting* . Tony raises an eyebrow even though Ross can’t see him. “And why is that?”

“The Accords control you,” Ross said, in that undeniably smug voice. “And I control the Accords. So, unless you want things to become... *unfavorable*, for you, let’s say, you better come clean.”

Tony just blinked. “Yeah, nice try.” He said with a scoff. “In case you forgot, Ross, I’m Tony fucking Stark. You really think you can pull one over on me?”

The silence on the other line was calculating. “Ah, but not everyone is as untouchable as you, hm?”

“...Excuse me?” Tony said, voice sharp.

Like a satisfied cat, Ross went on. “Not everyone is *Tony fucking Stark* , as you so eloquently put it. There isn’t a shiny tower with their name on it. And, well, if they did happen to go missing, it’s not like anyone would be able to find them—a secret identity will do that, won’t it?”

Tony’s hand clenched around the table. “Don’t test me,” He warned. “You won’t like how it ends.”

The smile was evident in his next sentence. “I’m just saying, Stark. The Accords are always changing. And the Raft always has an open cell.”

His throat went dry. To this day, Tony’s visit to the Raft still bothered him—the low lighting and the ever present chill, the bleak concrete that everything seemed to be made of. Guards at every corner, stun batons cranked to the max.

It was all too easy to see Peter there, curled up in the corner of a six by eight, a thick inhibitor collar around his neck and a foot of plexiglass separating him from the world.

Tony took in a measured breath. “Listen here, Ross,” He said, almost gently. “If you so much as touch a single *hair* on Spider-Man’s head, nobody will be able to even *talk* about what happened to you without retching. They called me the Merchant of Death for a reason, you know?”

“You’re bluffing,” But his voice wavers. “You wouldn’t.”

Tony grins, all sharp angles. “Yeah? Who’s gonna be there to stop me? Captain America?” He let himself laugh aloud. Then, he leans close to the receiver. “Good luck finding him first.”

He hangs up before Ross can muster up some sort of response. Satisfied, he stretches out in his seat. “Risky move,” FRIDAY notes from above. Tony gives an elegant shrug. “But not excessive.”

The AI hums in a way that he has come to associate with agreement. “You need to be down in the lab in five minutes,” She reminds him after a second.

Tony sighs. “Right,” He stands up, rolling his shoulders. “Let me know if good ol’ Thaddeus calls again, won’t you?”

“Of course. I will also take the liberty of commandeering the hold music.”

“That’s my girl,” Tony says, flashing a grin to the ceiling.

When he gets down to the lab, Percy and Bucky are already waiting for him, Mrs. O’Leary fast asleep in the corner under a large table.

Percy had a major case of bedhead, along with a strange imprint of something on his cheek. Had he not fallen asleep in his bed? As Tony drew closer, his brow furrowed slightly. To his relief, Percy didn’t look dead on his feet like he usually did after working until he dropped.

The demigod had just slept weird, probably.

Bucky, on the other hand, didn't look particularly well-rested. He did, however, look oddly relaxed. Comfortably slumped in a chair, hair tied up in a messy ponytail. He knows Percy always makes him at least try to nap after a session, so Tony's not too worried.

Even now, as he starts readying BARF, a part of his mind is still miles away, in a private room in the hospital, Dr. Cho on standby.

Dan was still getting some well-deserved rest; Tony was going to stop by after this and see if he'd wake anytime soon. Nanotech was finicky, but it really was their only chance for Dan to live a semi-normal life like his old one.

Tony had wanted desperately to present the idea to Rhodey, but he had a feeling his friend would decline his offer. The braces worked perfectly fine, and, with a significant amount of PT, he might be able to stand on his own one day, anyways. It would take years, and it was a big *maybe*, but if there was a chance Rhodey could do it on his own, Tony knew he'd take it.

But if the tech did work, Tony'd make sure it got sent Rhodey's way first, anyways.

Just in case.

In the meantime, though, Tony just started attaching the little pads to Barnes's forehead and temples, temporarily drawing his focus back to the matter at hand.

Chapter End Notes

this WILL be getting progressively more homosexual as the month goes on. thanks for asking.

and after june, you ask?

well, my dearest readers, after gay pride month, we move on to gay wrath month. we're cycling through all the sins in 2022.

want to figure out how to become immune in the eyes of the law? follow me on insta
@beansofdenim

we've got character art all around, lads

HEY FUCKERS

THE AMAZINGLY TALENTED SALLOW HAS MADE SOME BOMB ASS
ART!!! ITS ON THEIR PROFILE AND YOU SHOULD CHECK IT OUT
BECAUSE ITS VERY COOL

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Blueberry Pancakes and Decapitated Heads

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Saturday, August 9th

9:43 AM

Stark Tower, NY

Tony'd left almost immediately after the session was over. He'd been apologizing as he packed up the equipment, and Bucky had rolled his eyes. Percy had made a scoffing noise from the back of the room. "Yeah, you're going to check in on my teammate, who's currently being attended by the best doctor in the world on your dime, to work on the nanotech you invented that can fix nerve damage. What an asshole."

He didn't need to see Tony's face to see that it was pink. It was almost funny; Tony could say the things that he did, in public, all the time, but still turn bright at a compliment. It would've been funny, if Percy hadn't known the reasons why he was so unused to them.

James was always a little shaky after the sessions. Percy let him dwell in his silence, not nudging him into speaking. Instead, he made pancakes, and they ate in relative quiet. Just as Percy had finished inhaling his last blueberry one, he spoke up. "Oh, by the way, sorry about last night. I shouldn't have passed out on you like that."

Bucky blinked, startled. "Oh," He said, fork halfway to his mouth. "That? Don't worry about it."

Percy tilted his head, but nodded anyways.

Screams still rang in Bucky's ears as they ate.

He could remember them, now.

Mel Yates, 43. Shot from the building across the street.

David Yarbough, 51. Poisoned.

The Sinkamore family. Sabotaged gas main. The whole house went up in flames. He'd sealed the doors and windows.

Despite the sweet syrup, his breakfast tasted like ash.

Percy never pressed him to talk about it, which Bucky appreciated. Maybe one day, he'd be able to. Not now. But one day.

The stack on the wire rack in the kitchen was truly impressive. Enough for a normal family of six, maybe. But between a supersoldier and an Enhanced, they both put it away no problem. Mentally, Bucky checked off *enhanced metabolism* under the list of things about Percy.

So far, his abilities seemed like a mixed bag; some sort of radar super-senses, prophetic dreams, the ability to eat nine chocolate chip pancakes in five minutes, and being able to kill a man without even twitching?

A strange skillset, certainly. But interesting.

It suited him.

The room was filled with sounds of cutlery on plates, of a sponge scrubbing on dishes, the clink of restacking newly cleaned plates in their cabinets.

Behind them, Mrs. O'Leary was chowing down on her own breakfast—what looked like a whole cow's leg, bone and all.

A shrill ringtone broke the silence. Percy's head shot up at the sound, his eyes widening ever so slightly as he scrambled for the phone. It was an old thing, Bucky noted, basic compared to the one he usually saw Percy use. It was clearly on the worn side, too.

“Wade,” Percy breathed. The voice on the other line said something in reply, and Percy’s whole body seemed to exhale, muscles loosening up and relaxing. A slight smile overcame his face; the subconscious kind that you didn’t know you were wearing until someone pointed it out.

Bucky watched, intrigued. The kind of familiarity Percy was displaying was new; was this one of his elusive cousins he’d mentioned? One of the handful of friends he’d held close since he was a teenager, maybe?

He watched as Percy’s mouth fell agape. “You’re shitting me,” He breathed. “Godsdamnit it,” Percy bit out, pressing a knuckle to the spot in between his eyebrows. “I’ll get Tony,” He said, suddenly straightening up and gesturing for Bucky to follow.

He tossed his remaining pancake a mournful look as he jogged to catch up with Percy, who was already striding out of the apartment. Despite Bucky being a couple inches taller, he struggled to catch up with the rapid pace.

“Yeah, fuck, I’m almost there.” Percy continued to exchange hushed conversation with the man on the phone as they stepped into the elevator.

Tony was waiting for them in the common room, looking like he’d run there. He’d clearly been in the middle of work; his sleeves were pushed up, his tablet was tucked under his arm, and he was still wearing his shoes. He must’ve rushed home from the hospital, Percy realized with a tinge of guilt. “What happened?” He demanded, eyes worried.

Percy just pulled the phone away from his ear in response. Tony almost recoiled at the sight of the thing. “Is that a flip phone?” He asked, nose scrunched. “Keep that away from me. It’ll give me hives.”

Bucky snorted softly. Percy’s lips twitched upwards, only for a second, as he cleared his throat. “Alright, you’re on speaker.”

“Oh, goody.” The voice on the other end said. Tony made a questioning face, and then realized only a second later Percy couldn’t see it. He turned to Bucky for answers instead, but the supersoldier just shrugged.

“Alright, everyone sitting down? Got the carpet squares in a circle on the floor for story time?”

The stranger didn't wait for a response. "Cool. So, long story short, I found a bunch of shady shit. Talkin', like, *real* shady. So I got to reading it, and," The voice faltered. Bucky heard him audibly take in a breath before continuing, like he was trying to steel himself for what he was about to say. "The majority of the papers with data on something they called Subject C-4."

Both his and Tony's eyebrows shot up in tandem.

Percy clenched his jaw, his grip tight on the phone. "And I realized," The man continued, "That C-4 was a person. Percy, they have all this data on you, and I have *no* fucking clue who it got spread around to."

The familiarity the stranger spoke with Percy was ignored in favor of the dawning realization. "The stuff from..." Tony trailed off in a question he couldn't bring himself to finish.

Ontario , Bucky mentally filled in.

Stiffly, Percy nodded.

Tony swore under his breath.

The guy on the phone sighed. "I'm sorry, Perce." He said, sounding genuine. "I'm...I'm gonna let you deal with this. Call me back before you go to bed, alright?"

As if it was a deeply ingrained habit, Percy agreed. "Thanks, Wade." He said before the call ended.

And then he just stood there, arms tightly crossed, an unknowable expression on his face. Tony carefully put a hand on his arm. "You alright?"

Percy gave a weak shrug. "I'm...as expected."

Tony nodded, a pinched look on his face. "Your friend...what did he mean by data?" He asked. Then, after a beat, "And who was that? Not another one of.... your family members, I'm guessing?"

And Bucky might've imagined it, but he could've sworn that Tony was about to say something other than *your family members*.

"Fri sent it to your phone. And that was Wade."

Tony blinked.

"Deadpool," Percy clarified.

"You know *Deadpool*?" Tony throws his hands up in the air. "Who am I kidding? Of course you know Deadpool." He exclaims. Percy smiles at him, quick and shark-like. It's gone faster than it appeared, falling back into its upset stance in one swift moment.

Bucky watches him carefully, but all Percy does is sigh. His shoulders slump, and he looks so resigned to it all it makes Bucky's heart clench. "I just don't *get it*."

"Get what?" Tony asked, frowning.

Percy made a wide, sweeping gesture in the air. "The whole experiment was independent, but he," He swallows around the pronoun, face tightening, "Didn't share his results? Except for *one* copy? And—and the *kids*."

"Kids?" Bucky echoes, concern lacing his words.

Tony's face is tight. "Recently, we've been dealing with a series of Enhanced children being trafficked. And, wouldn't you know, they all have similar powers as Percy."

The supersoldier blinks. "You think whoever was... *buying* those kids is the same person who has the data on Percy?"

Two twin shrugs. "Wade confirmed the documents were only accessed by one person. And..." Percy's voice shakes a bit. Tony's face takes on a pained look, finishing for him. "And since

everyone in Ontario died, that rules out anyone there.” He pauses and turns towards Percy. “Does anyone else know the details of your abilities?”

“Humans? No. Well, Wade, but there’s not a chance in Hell he would’ve let something slip.” Percy says after a second.

Tony nods definitely. “Has to be the same person, then.”

Bucky’s stomach clenched. “I really don’t like this,” He muttered.

Percy shrugged. “At this point?” He said morosely. “I’m used to it.”

Saturday, August 9th

11:34 AM

New York Presbyterian Queens Hospital

Lee sighed, shutting his phone off with a harsh tap.

Dr. Cho had been the only one permitted in the hospital room since Dan underwent surgery. Dr. Stark had been there, too, but had gotten a ping on his phone and had sped out of the room. He sent an apology text ten minutes later, promising he would return as soon as he dealt with something.

All their teammates had been prowling around the waiting room like animals in a cage, agitated and sharp. They’d been ushered into a private room, long ago, where they could still discuss their work without being suffocated under penalties for leaking classified information.

It was almost tangible, how much they missed Dan. How glaringly obvious it was that they were one man short.

All of them, especially Mal, knew their way around a computer—but all the finer points of the work were left to their resident expert. That didn't deter them from searching, still, because according to Jackson, there might be a link in everything after all.

Lee knew about the data he'd been alerted to—how and why there was a grossly in depth pile of reports on what made his boss tick, Lee didn't know. Nor did he want to. The curiosity was there, of course, but in an idle, vague sense that could sway either way.

He was under no illusions that his propensity for minding his own business had nothing to do with him being assigned second in command; Lee quite simply didn't care about things that didn't concern himself or the mission directly. Whatever Jackson had been involved in, in any capacity, wasn't relevant at the moment. It was personal. At the second it wasn't, he'd let up on the information.

But, somehow, there was a possible link between this data, which, apparently should have been destroyed, and the uptick of trafficking they'd seen. And if Lee read in between the lines that Jackson had something in common with those kids, he didn't bring it up.

There was another thing, on top of the *other* million things on his mind, that he wasn't sure how to approach.

Project Integrity.

It'd been flitting in and out of the edges of his mind for months, haunting him. Lee felt like there was *something*, just out of reach, barely brushing his fingertips.

Somebody had information on Jackson that was supposed to be destroyed, and had bought, and consequently killed, a bunch of kids because of it.

Someone had gotten a mole into the WSC guard rotation and had tried to assassinate Sergeant Barnes on live television.

Someone had withdrawn half a million dollars and hired Brock Rumlow to kill Dr. Stark.

As he closed his computer and stood up, stretching his cramped muscles, Lee's perpetually visible frown tightened. All these things, happening in less than a year...

It was just *off*, he decided as he slung his messenger bag strap over his shoulder. They'd been staking out the hospital in shifts, and Lee's had ended over half an hour ago. He waved to Mal on the way out, taking the elevator down to the sublevel.

The garage was well lit; too well lit, in his opinion. Or maybe that was just the splitting headache that had been plaguing him for the last few days. He rubbed at his temple as he swung up into the driver's seat of his pickup, fiddling absentmindedly with the radio knob.

Traffic was oddly light, for noon on a weekend. Which was probably for the best, because in the state he was in, if someone started pulling some bullshit on the bypass, he might've just hit them.

He knew he should be going home, about now. He'd been on duty at the WSC chamber before coming here—he'd been up for much longer than considered healthy. He also had a million things to do; primarily, taking a nap. But with the edge of a breakthrough poking at him, he wouldn't be able to. The least he needed to do was drop off his bag at the office—just in case anyone needed the documents he had, later.

The Hub was a relatively small building, compared to other federal offices. Considering the fact that it was literally just their seven men and one 'dog' team, it made sense. Lee liked it; it was easier to memorize every twist and turn of the halls, every back room and storage closet.

He knew this building like the back of his hand, and that's why he was barely paying attention as he swiped his keycard at the front door. Lee yawned his way through the hallways, focus more on putting one foot in front of the other instead of where he was going.

It was warm, inside, the kind that had him considering stopping in the hallway to roll up his sleeves and loosen his tie and collar.

Getting to the main conference room was an autopilot setting, even as worn out as he was. He swiped his keycard once more, scanned his thumb, and punched in the code without even blinking, already pulling his satchel off his shoulder to drop on the oval shaped table so he could go home.

Something *smelled*. It hit him like a truck, making him rear back with a scrunched nose. He looked around for a second, before his eyes landed on the conference table. He gave a slow, languid blink.

There was a head on the table.

Placed upright, face pale and drained of blood. Slowly, Lee unholstered his gun from his hip, internally thanking the fact that he was too tired to take it off when he got into the car. Silently flipping off the safety, he brought it up, finger hovering over the trigger.

He rounded the table, taking in the scene as he drew closer. There was a smudge of blood on the back of the neck. It wasn't completely dry.

“Activate lockdown. Override Echo-Green-43.” He spoke aloud, eyes not moving from the other set of doors to the conference room. The ones he came through connected to the main hall and front entrance, but the other set led into the bullpen, and consequently the break room, evidence lockup, the archives, the storage closets, and the security room. Along with at least six other exits.

In the distance, the sound of the doors and windows automatically locking met his ears.

Lee searched every square inch of the facility, not lowering his service weapon once. Every corner he turned, every door he opened, he was intimately aware that if there was somebody in there with him, there was no way out, not until one of the other members saw the lockdown alert and arrived.

Halfway through his third pass of the bullpen, he grit his teeth and reholsted the gun. Lee circled back to the conference room, taking the steps up two at a time.

The head on the table hadn't moved an inch. Not that he expected it to—he was just half convinced it was some sort of stress induced hallucination.

Lee skirted around the table, going for his satchel. From inside, he pulled on a pair of disposable gloves. Dan had always made fun of him for carrying them around, but, well, who was laughing now?

Nobody, actually, because there was a *decapitated head* in his workplace.

“God,” Lee muttered. “I hate New York.” He pressed two fingers to the side of the face, gently. It was warm. It had probably been left in the heat for a while, explaining the stench. He then inspected the edge of the neck as much as he could without moving the head. The cut was clean, quick. Made by somebody who didn't hesitate.

He gently prodded the skin, then frowned. There was something *under* the head. As carefully as he could, he caught the edge of it between two fingers and slid it out.

A once crisp, white notecard, now damp with things he didn't quite want to consider. There were only two words on it;

STOP LOOKING

Lee sighed.

Chapter End Notes

SWORDS really goin through it, huh

shits picking up my guys

loving reminder that you can find me and character art on insta @beansofdenim, along with the nuclear codes and a sick brownie recipe

for anyone who can't find it on instagram, here's a link for percy's art

<https://ibb.co/mTHZGG3>

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Integrity

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Saturday, August 9th

12:41 PM

The Hub, NY

Everyone showed up at about the same time.

Thankfully, Jackson was first. He was the only one who could override Lee's already present one. They waited anxiously, a few feet back from him, as he strode towards the front entrance. The tension in the air was palpable, characterized by shifting weight and shared glances.

They couldn't afford to lose anyone else.

Ross prayed that whatever was inside wouldn't be the straw that broke the camel's back. Lee was tough. He'd be fine.

Everyone was all here, sans Dan, obviously. Mal had been the one on shift in the hospital, but had reluctantly left to come to the building. Dr. Cho had assured her it was fine, that he was still asleep.

He slept a lot these days.

Jackson scanned his thumbprint, punched in a code, and then said something they couldn't hear. The metal paneling over the front entrance receded with a quiet whir, allowing them to step inside.

He walked inside first, and they all trailed after him. Ross didn't miss how Jackson's hand was drifting to the inside of his jacket as he inhaled the stale air. The man hadn't gone into any detail about his abilities, and they had just all assumed something along the lines of enhanced senses to compensate.

Maybe he could smell blood.

They turned the corner, steps echoing down the eerily empty halls. For the first time, Ross didn't feel quite at home in this building. There was just something here that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end, sending a chill down her spine despite the summer heat.

The lights were on at the end of the hallway.

Lee was standing in front of the conference room doors, facing away from them. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, and his satchel was slung over a shoulder, and his shoulders were stiffer than his usual rigid posture.

When Jackson didn't say anything, Ross looked at him out of the corner of her eyes. His face was curled in part disgust, part incredulity. Another beat of silence passed, and Ross took it upon herself to speak up. "What happened? What's with the lockdown?"

Then Lee turned around, and took a step towards them, no longer blocking the open doorway to the conference room.

Ross almost gagged, and he knew Bridgette was the one who made that dreadful retching noise.

Lee just gave them a look. "Stay out here if you need to." He said primly. "Actually, all of you stay out here. The less people that go in there, the better." Then he nodded at Jackson, and the two walked into the conference room.

Ross took a few steps forward to get a better view, and that's when he smelled it.

It was rancid, like an old, festering wound.

Now *this* was gagworthy.

He quickly brought a hand up, pinching his nose, craning his neck to watch the two's hushed conversation.

Lee handed the commander a spare pair of gloves, which he immediately slipped on. Then, *oh God*, Lee carefully picked up the head and handed it to him. The man inspected it for a second, then shook his head regretfully. Lee sighed, and then pulled out an evidence bag.

They talked for a moment more, both faces grim.

Jackson walked out a second later, leaving Lee in there alone.

“It’s fresh.” He said without preamble. “The placement, that is. Not the head. It can’t have been there for more than a few hours. None of you go in there until Lee’s finished bagging up the scene. Understood?”

Everyone agreed, still shellshocked. Jackson sighed, mouth a thin line. “We’ll meet in my office. I’ll debrief Lee later.”

As they followed him, Ross belatedly realized that he’d never seen the commander’s office before.

She wasn’t quite sure what she expected, really. It was neat, with a few plants growing on the bookshelves on the back wall. The only thing slightly out of place was the giant dog bowl full of water on the floor in the corner.

Jackson leaned against the desk. “We’re going to rush the labs results, but until then...” He shook his head, hand on the edge of the desktop tightening. “Someone got in here. They snuck right into our headquarters without a single trace. Nobody even signed in during the time frame it would have been left here.”

Mal grit her teeth. “The notecard. ‘*Stop looking,*’” She muttered. “Is this about Integrity, do you think? Could it be connected?”

His face was stony. “I think this is connected to much more than just Project Integrity, Mal.”

Saturday, August 9th

2:16 PM

Stark Tower, NY

Percy had rushed out of the building without a word, wide eyed and speaking rapidly into his phone. Bucky and Tony exchanged worried looks, but didn't try to stop him.

Now, the two sat in the common room, trudging their way through the list of movies Tony had declared Bucky needed to watch to complete his education on the twenty-first century. They were halfway through *Jaws* when Percy came back, his tie loose and sleeves rolled up to his elbows, looking far more stressed than usual.

He dropped his bag on the floor on his way to the couch, collapsing down on it face first. He may have let out a muffled scream into the cushions—Bucky wasn't entirely sure.

Tony raised a brow. "You good, bud?"

With a groan, Percy flipped onto his back. "Was I a horrible person in a past life?" He wondered aloud, hair sticking up in every direction. "Maybe that's why things like this keep happening."

"Things like what?" Bucky found himself asking, slight amusement curling in his voice.

Percy sighed. "Decapitated head in my place of work."

"Excuse me?" Tony cut in.

Percy didn't clarify, continuing on. "Maybe I was somebody like, *really* awful. Like Isaac Newton."

"What's your problem with Newton?" Tony asked blandly.

“Made calculus.”

“Ah.”

From his seat, Bucky tilted his head. “Maybe you’re cursed. Ever consider that?”.

Percy made a valiant effort of shooting Tony a dirty look when he snorted. “You make fun, but it’s something I’ve looked into.” He sighed again. “I am cursed, in case you were wondering. But just to suck ass at archery. My cousin checked.”

“Archery?” Tony repeated, surprised. “Why?”

“Long story involving my archery enthusiast cousin having an issue with my dad, like, a thousand years ago. It’s on me and all my siblings—nothing personal. None of us can shoot bows for shit.”

Bucky blinked, a little blindsided. Percy never mentioned his family much, sans his cousins that one time with the pizza and the whipped cream that they had silently agreed to never mention again.

The way he was talking now, though, implied that his family was much larger and complicated than he originally thought. And his cousin cursed him? Bucky knew about magic, of course—Hydra had a division specifically dedicated to the occult and related subjects. He had no idea there was magic in Percy’s bloodline, though.

“Can we circle back to the decapitated head?” Tony asked politely.

Percy made a loud, frustrated noise. “Lee found it on our conference table, along with a note that just said ‘stop looking’. Incredibly vague, isn’t it? We didn’t find any prints or anything, either. I checked it over for anything odd. Whoever did this was damn good, and *also* somehow got into our top secret government facility.”

“Fantastic,” Bucky drawled. “Truly.”

Percy flipped him off.

When nobody spoke for a while, Tony had FRIDAY unpause the movie, now with the descriptive audio enabled. Ten minutes in, Percy shook his head. "So inaccurate," He mumbled under his breath. Tony shot him an amused look.

Just as the credits were rolling, Percy's phone rang. A second after answering, before he could even get a single word out, he paled. "You're sure?"

The voice on the other line sighed. "Positive. Family came in and ID'd him. Can we release the body to them?"

Percy's eyes briefly shut. "Yeah," He said eventually. "It's the least we can do."

After getting the affirmative from the other person, Percy sighed and hung up. "Head got matched up to the guard who got replaced at the last minute in the chamber. The one Aspen found dead in his living room."

Tony's face went grim. "So the assassination attempt and whatever you guys are looking into are definitely related?"

"Yep." Percy grunted, letting his head fall back down onto the cushion. "Without a doubt."

"Wonderful."

Sunday, August 10th

1:57 AM

Stark Tower, NY

He'd had another nightmare.

And while Percy had told him he didn't mind being woken up, Bucky still didn't go to his door. The urge to get out of his apartment itched under his skin, and he found himself wandering to the kitchen on the common floor, instead.

The kettle was stuffed in the back of the pantry on the top shelf, far from view. It clearly was rarely used, if ever. It was a pleasant, calm color, like the rest of the appliances of the tower.

He stuck it under the tap and listened to the steady sounds of it filling up, the shaky feeling in his hands slowly dissipating. He stuck it on the closest burner, fitting the lid onto the top.

When he heard the footsteps, he was leaning up against the counter, waiting for the telltale whistling. In an instant, Bucky whipped around, pinpointing the sound to the corner, where the ceiling met the walls.

The steps were slow, dragging, and very much not coming from the floor.

Bucky lunged to the side, grabbing a blade from the knife block, and reaching over the counter for the light switch.

Crouched on top of the ceiling like something straight out of the fucking *Conjuring*, a bleary eyed teenager stared back at him, wearing Thor pajama pants and a pullover that was several sizes too large.

Bucky blinked, lowering the knife. "Why are you on the ceiling?" He whispered.

The kid's eyes darted to the left, then the right. "I don't know," He replied in a hushed tone. "Why are we whispering?"

"Because it's two in the fucking morning," The kettle started screeching in the background, and both he and the kid winced. Bucky took a few steps backwards, then reluctantly turned around to take it off the stove, putting the knife back into its slot on the way. He stopped halfway to grabbing a mug. "Do you want tea?"

After a beat, the kid dropped down from the ceiling, landing perfectly on his feet with unnatural grace. Bucky narrowed his eyes. “Sure,” He said after a second, drifting over to a barstool.

While he was beginning to steep the tea, Bucky got a better look at the kid's face. And this *was* a kid, undoubtedly—his face was still round, the slope of his jaw gentle and the set of his eyes wide and doe-like. Soft brown curls stuck in every direction atop his head, and his skin was dotted with freckles.

Bucky couldn't help but notice that, if he squinted, the kid looked like a softer version of a young Tony. He entertained the idea, briefly, that this was some sort of secret love child, or something. The tower was certainly big enough that Bucky would have no idea if someone else lived here full time.

But he shook it away. He'd seen a lot of the things Stark did—the nuke in the wormhole, for example. Tony never would've done that if there was a kid depending on him that he would have left alone. Bucky knew, if Tony did have a kid, he would never have chanced leaving him behind like his own parents did.

He placed the steaming mug in front of the kid, who startled slightly, clearly having zoned out. He wrapped his hands around the mug, bringing the warmth close. “Do you usually offer tea to strange people who show up in your kitchen?”

Bucky grunted, taking a sip of his own. “Just the ones in Hello Kitty shirts.”

The kid blushed scarlet.

Mug hiding his smile, Bucky cast a glance up to the ceiling. FRIDAY would've alerted him if the kid wasn't supposed to be here—and, *please*, a random Enhanced teenager on the ceiling was one of the least weird things he's seen in the last couple years.

“Thank you for the tea, Sergeant Barnes.”

“Just Bucky, kid.” Then, he frowned. That voice...

He squinted. “Spider-Man?”

The kid froze for a second, then slumped forward. "I'm not even going to try and deny it, at this point." He mumbled. "My name's Peter."

"Nice to meet you, Peter."

"You too."

They each took a sip.

Then,

"Wait, are you telling me a *twelve year old* caught my punch?" Bucky demanded.

"I'm not twelve!"

Annabeth stared at him uncomprehendingly. "So," She said slowly. "You found a thing called Project Integrity, and someone snuck into your top secret facility and left a head there as a warning to stop looking. The head of the guy that was killed so someone could try and kill Barnes."

"Yep."

"And a bunch of money was withdrawn from this same project to try and assassinate Tony, but they shot you instead, last year."

"Mhm."

"And now someone has an in-depth report on you and everything you can do."

“Correct.”

She blinked. “And Hydra is involved in this, somehow.”

“They usually are.” Percy agreed.

Annabeth threw her hands up. “Well, that sucks, I guess.”

Percy threw his head back and laughed.

When he woke up, the humor was chased away from his face, all traces of mirth as intangible as the rest of Morpheus’s realm.

He didn’t move, not yet, staying still on his back, Mrs. O’Leary snoring next to him. It had been a long, long day, but he knew going back to sleep wasn’t in the realm of possibilities. Even before all the demigod stuff—well, the stuff he knew about—Percy never was a good sleeper.

He just thought too much, that was all.

He’d called Wade back before he went to bed. Though it seemed like days had passed, he’d only promised that very morning—or, maybe, yesterday morning, considering the fact it was probably well past midnight.

Wade had sighed, right before signing off. “Why do you do this to yourself, Percy?”

Percy’s lips had parted, but he said nothing, because he truly didn’t know.

“You’ve repaid your personal debt to Tony Stark tenfold, by now. Why do you stay there? With a government whose head is so far up its ass that they don’t even notice when dozens of Enhanced kids go missing? Or they just don’t care?”

Once more, he had no reply.

“I mean, God, Percy. There was a decapitated *head* on your *desk* !” Wade hissed. “And you sound awful, I mean, when’s the last time you got a good night’s sleep?” He sounded angry, almost, voice getting sharper as he went on. “You’re running yourself into the ground trying to do a thankless job, saving people when your own government would want you *dead* if they knew just what you were!” Wade was yelling by the end of his speech.

Percy pressed his lips together tightly, then shook his head, running a hand through his hair. He knew Wade wasn’t yelling out of anger. Frustration, maybe, and worry, definitely.

“I—” He choked out, voice failing. Percy wet his lips. “Because I think,” He said slowly, each word like a confession, “If I don’t do this, if I don’t care about these people, nobody will.”

He dropped his head, elbows braced on his knees. “It’s *bad*, Wade. Some people are calling Nick Hodgins a hero, you know? For trying to kill Barnes. As if he wasn’t just some bigot with a gun.” Percy spat. “Just because James is Enhanced.”

“Jesus...” Wade breathed.

Percy nodded. “Like putting down a rabid dog, Wade. That’s what someone said.” The hand not holding his phone clenched into a fist. “I didn’t tell him. How could I?”

“I don’t know, Perce.”

“Yeah, me neither.” Percy rubbed a hand across his forehead. “They don’t care about these people, Wade. Not Barnes, not the kids being trafficked, not even the ones who went missing in Ontario. *Nobody* cares.”

“I get that, I really do.” Wade said softly. “But why does it have to be you?”

The question threw him off, and he inhaled sharply. Percy bit down on the inside of his cheek. “It always is,” He found himself replying.

“That’s...so much worse. You know that, right?” When Percy didn’t respond, Wade prompted him once more. “Please tell me you know that.”

“It’s life,” He eventually said. “Mine, at least.”

“And how much longer are you going to be able to live like that, Percy? How much longer until you break under the pressure?”

That was a question Percy had asked himself a million times, for as long as he could remember.

How long could he take Gabe’s rage, his drunken fists and slurred out words? How long could he have all eyes on him, the Big Three kid, watching, waiting? How many quests could he lead, how many battles could he command? How many people could die before he really, *truly*, snapped?

Could losing his memory, his life, do it?

The Pit?

Maybe.

Maybe the Pit got closer than he would ever admit.

The acidic air and the water that was wrong, and *Annabeth*—

He got out of there.

Maybe this was the one thing that would break him. Because something like this, he couldn’t just take head on. This wasn’t something a sword could fix.

“I won’t break.” He said. “I won’t.”

He'd already carried the weight of the world on his shoulders, and had the gray streak and the fucked up wrists to prove it. He could do it again. He had no choice.

Percy couldn't break. He *couldn't*.

Gods know what would happen if he did.

Wade, hearing the resoluteness in his tone, didn't argue. He just sighed. "You know, you could always go back to being a merc. We could team up again. It'd be nice. Travel around, visit that one little town in Italy again. You wouldn't have to hide."

It was tempting.

So, unbelievably tempting.

The sea wasn't meant to be restrained, and Percy, despite the freedom he had, was covered head to toe in the shackles of hiding just who he was; bonds he made himself. Each lie formed a link in the chain that dragged him down, down, *down*.

"I don't think there's anything that could make me put that suit back on," He said. Not *no*, but not that suit with the memories and the promises and the life that would never be fulfilled stitched into every square inch.

"You could get a new one," Wade said.

"That's just the thing," Percy replied softly. "I don't think I could."

A gentle sigh. "Goodnight, Percy."

"Goodnight, Wade."

And now, a few hours later, Percy lay awake, replaying every second of that conversation in his head.

To *leave*, to move out of the tower and to resign from SWORD, to go back to traveling the world on nobody's beck and call but his own, hanging out with Wade and dropping in to see his cousins and other family whenever he wanted, to not have to come into work to find a bloody head waiting for him.

Was he a bad person if he really, *really* thought about it?

Chapter End Notes

have some percy angst

SWORD: oh god what if lee's dead

-meanhile-

lee:

the decapitated head:

peter:

bucky: ???????

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Contingency

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sunday, August 10th

8:04 AM

Stark Tower, NY

Peter hadn't gone back to bed. He knew he should have, but even with exhaustion creeping under his skin, he couldn't shake the feeling.

His bed, both here and at home, was loaded up with numerous thick, weighted blankets. They were warm and heavy, usually a comforting thing.

But last night, when he'd woken up in a panic with them pressing down on his chest, all he could think of was the warehouse, Toomes, and being slowly, slowly crushed to death.

Sergeant Barnes had made him a cup of tea, which then turned into two more mugs, this time filled with hot chocolate, when the tremors didn't quite leave his shoulders and hands.

They didn't talk much at all. Instead, Peter had asked him how caught up he was with movies and the like, and after a bit of internal debate, Peter introduced him to *Avatar: The Last Airbender*.

They were just starting the second season when Percy padded out of the elevator and into the kitchen, grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge and then drifting into the living room. To his credit, he barely reacted to the urban legend of an assassin watching cartoons with a teenage vigilante beyond the twitch of a single brow.

"Budge over," He muttered, sitting down on the loveseat beside Sergeant Barnes.

The man grunted, but obliged, scooching to the left side. Once Percy had curled into his own side of the cushions, Barnes looked over. "Rough night?"

Percy shrugged. "Of sorts."

"Dreams?"

"Yeah,"

Peter watched the two for a second, then shrugged, turned on the descriptive audio, and pressed play.

Peter had wandered away a few episodes later, off to...wherever a spider-child went when he wasn't protecting the streets at night. Bucky cast a glance at Percy. "Really though, are you alright?"

Percy gave a loose shrug. "Have trouble sleeping when I'm stressed." He said, picking at a loose thread of his sweatshirt.

Bucky blinked, unable to keep the surprise out of his voice. "Really?"

The other man gave him a slight smile. "I know, it's a little ridiculous. You'd think I would've gotten over it by now, considering the type of life that I live, but," He shrugged again.

"I don't think it's ridiculous." He said immediately. Then, Bucky looked down. A tad quieter, he added, "I can't sleep when it's cold. Even just a little bit bothers me. Reminds me of cryo." He clears his throat. "Sometimes, when it was cool outside, I'd go to sleep, and it'd be like I was going under. I'd wake up expecting Karpov to be standing over me."

Percy's soft inhale made him wince a little, expecting pity. But Percy just settled a hand on his shoulder, his grip firm but gentle.

And warm. Really warm.

Sunday, August 10th

2:12 PM

Stark Tower, NY

“So,” Tony drawled, leaning up against the counter. “You met Peter?”

Bucky paused in his drying, the rag stalling against the smooth ceramic of the plate. “I guess so,” He said evenly.

Tony nodded. “And you understand,” He said softly, “How important that kid is to me?” The rest of his statement went unsaid. *What I’ll do if anything happens to him.*

He gently placed the dish onto the countertop. “Tony,” Bucky said, meeting his eyeline. “If I had to pick between hurting you, or Peter, or Percy, or *anyone*, and death?” His words hold a vicious steel to them. “I’d choose death in a heartbeat.”

Tony’s mouth parted in surprise, brown eyes widening. He stared at Bucky for a long second, as if waiting for him to take the statement back. Bucky remained steadfast, and Tony swallowed and nodded. “I—” He shook his head. “I don’t think that’s up to me, Barnes.”

“Not up to you?” Bucky echoed, brow drawn.

In lieu of a response, Tony just shook his head once more.

It took embarrassingly long to puzzle it all out.

He took the elevator up to Percy’s apartment, and knocked lightly at the door, his other hand shoved into the pocket of his jacket.

Muffled behind the wood, Percy's voice; "Hey, James! It's open!"

He wasn't at all surprised that Percy knew who was behind the door without even hearing his voice. Bucky swung the door open and drifted inside, his face tight.

Immediately, Percy frowned, taking out his earbuds. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing *wrong*, I just..." He didn't venture into the living room beyond, instead leaning against the kitchen island. "Can you be honest with me?"

Percy didn't immediately say *yes*. In a way, though, Bucky found that comforting. A man who agreed to be candid about something without knowing what it was most certainly had no plans to tell you the truth. "About what?" Percy asked.

Bucky drummed his fingers on his thigh, trying to figure out how best to word this.

"I always wondered about how you guys intended to take down the Soldier if he came back."

The color drained from Percy's face. With one hand, he closed his laptop, palm resting on the top of it. Bucky took that as his cue to keep going.

"I assumed, at first, that it would be something of Tony's. Lord knows that man has enough firepower at his fingertips to do it." The AIs, the suits, the weapons system that was undoubtedly part of the tower.

Bucky bit at the inside of his cheek, working his jaw and avoiding looking at Percy's face. "But I was allowed to leave the tower. I got separated from Tony. I didn't get it." He admitted. "I knew I was missing something. But then I realized," He glanced up, just for a second. Percy's chin was dipped low, his hands folded on the table. "I was never really separated from *you*."

He stayed silent for a moment, still as a statue. Then, Percy inclined his head, ever so slightly. "For what it's worth," He whispered, "I'm sorry."

Despite already suspecting it, Bucky leaned back in shock, the counter supporting his weight.

Percy went on, the admission soft and pained. "I didn't want to. But I'm the only one who has a chance."

"To take me down, if it comes to that."

The green hues of Percy's eyes darkened under the warm light of the kitchen. "Yes."

When Bucky didn't respond, he pressed his lips together so tightly they turned white. "I'm sorry, James." He choked out. "I really am. I wish it was different, but—"

"Good."

Percy's lips, parted in the midst of an abandoned word, widened further in shock.

Bucky ran his tongue over his teeth. "It's—I'm not offended," He fumbled out. "You have good reason."

"Still," He softly returned.

"Don't be." Bucky looked up, his eyes hard and steely. "I'm going to ask you for something else, if that's alright."

"Anything," Percy replied without hesitation.

Bucky straightened up, pushing off of the counter and taking the seat next to Percy at the table. He was close enough to see every twitch of expression on his face, the washed out burn scars around his eyes, the confusion in his brow. He took in a shallow breath. "If something happens, if I turn back into *him*, I try to hurt Peter or Tony or *you*," He said intently, "I want you to kill me. Don't hesitate."

Percy reared back, eyes wide. Bucky didn't give him time to object, his hand wrapping firmly

around his bicep. “Promise me. If I turn back into the Soldier, if...if I’m gone. Kill me.”

There was something in Percy’s face, carved deep into him, something Bucky didn’t quite understand. He watched as Percy gave a short sniff, collecting himself. He reached out, grabbing Bucky’s forearm. “A last resort. If you’re gone.”

With those words, that gentle oath, Bucky collapsed forward like a puppet with its strings cut. He, embarrassingly enough, felt tears sting his eyes. Percy’s hand moved from his forearm to his back, thumb running reassuringly back and forth over his shoulder blade. “But that’s not going to happen,” Percy continued, voice determined. “It’s not going to come to that. You, James Barnes, are going to be *fine*. You hear me?”

Bucky nodded, any words that tried to come out getting stuck on the way. Percy smiled at him, the kind that softened his face and displayed his dimples. A beat passed, then, “You nodded, right? I’m assuming you nodded.”

It startled a laugh out of him. “Yeah. Yeah, I nodded.”

Bucky looked down at his hands. His right one, skin of his palms thick and calloused. There’s a jagged scar across the rough flesh, the washed out color hard to pick out. He only recently remembered where it came from.

He’d been in Amman, tracking down and slitting a diplomat’s throat in his own bed.

He’d left the body there for his kids to find.

On the way out, he stepped on a picture frame, the glass crunching under his boot. After a second, he’d picked it up, staring. It was a family portrait. They had all looked so happy.

His fist clenched around the corner of the frame, the metal bowing under the pressure. The Soldier hadn’t even registered a piece of the glass slicing through his palm as he tossed it aside.

At the time, he’d been confused. Why did looking at that picture *hurt*?

He knew, now.

In the photo, the young man had been holding up a girl on his shoulders. Their faces were so similar, in the way of their jaws and the angle of their noses. Siblings.

Rebecca Barnes had died in 1951. Polio.

His other hand, strong plates of seamlessly overlapping metal, glinted back at him in the warm lighting.

He wished he could have been there. Maybe things would have been different.

“You alright?”

Bucky gave a little shrug. “Jus’ thinking.”

Percy nodded. Then, “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“What color are your eyes?”

He blinked. Opened his mouth, closed it. Percy’s face was so earnest, so openly curious, it did something to his chest. Despite all his layers, the masks he switched out so smoothly, Percy Jackson was still a breathtakingly honest person.

“Blue,” He whispered. “They’re blue.”

Percy’s smile was pressed into his memory. “I love blue.”

Sunday, August 10th

2:12 PM

New York Presbyterian Queens Hospital

“Come on,” Dr. Cho coaxed, leaning in. “One more time,”

Dan grit his teeth, his muscles straining. It felt like static running up and down his arm, sending electric currents around his elbow and wrist. With some effort, he curled his fingers inwards, the tips touching his palm.

To his left, Dr. Stark cheered. Dan let out a relieved sigh, dropping back into the pillows. Dr. Cho patted him on the shoulder. “You’re doing fantastic work, Mr. Campbell.”

“Thanks,” He muttered, worn out.

Dr. Stark grinned at the StarkPad in front of him. “You’ll be back on your feet in no time,” He said. “It’s integrating with your nervous system even faster than we originally expected.”

Dan gave him a tired grin. “Really?”

He received another smile from Dr. Cho. “Really. If we keep making progress like we are, you’ll be back with your friends in weeks.” She cast a look to the door. “Speaking of,” She beckoned at the door.

Dan turned (holy shit, he *turned his neck*) towards the entryway. Mal was rocking on the heels of their sneakers, hands shoved into the pockets of their jean jacket. They were dressed casually, in straight, loose pants and a faded shirt, tied in a knot at the waist to compensate for its too large size. There was a tote bag over their shoulder, the one they’d bought at a local art fair from when they’d visited Nicaragua on a mission.

Dr. Cho and Stark both gave the agent smiles, and took their leave, edging past Mal in the doorway.

Mal took a few steps into the room, eyeing Dan speculatively. “How you been doing?”

He shrugged. It came out as a weak twitching gesture, but he celebrated the movement all the same. Mal’s face lit up at it, clearly not missing it either. A newfound bounce in their steps, they moved to Dan’s side.

Mal opened the tote bag, digging around inside of it. “I come bearing gifts,” They declared. First, they unloaded a gray thermos and spoon, putting them both on the side table in front of him. Dan didn’t need to ask who it came from—the thermos was a good brand, the expensive kind that lasted for years. The other clue was the neat label on the side.

“Lapskaus, plus Lee’s regards. Then we have this from Ross,” They pulled out a second container, this one full of muffins. “Chocolate banana,” Mal explained. Then, lastly, far more carefully than the other two things, they pulled out a small plant pot, which had been carefully cradled in the bag.

It was a regular terra cotta pot, with a single flower in it. Dan stared at it, entranced. The petals seemed to be spun from silver, emitting a soft, cool glow. “From Jackson.” Mal said. “We may have mentioned this place seemed a bit dull.”

Dan blinked, tearing his eyes away from the plant. “That’s...That’s really nice of him.” He noted.

Mal shrugged. “He cares. Even if he seems cold.”

“I know that,” Dan said immediately. Of course Jackson cared; he always went first into dangerous situations, putting himself at risk rather than his team. Dan didn’t have a single doubt that, if it came down to it, Jackson would take a bullet for any single one of them, point blank. “Just a little strange when he shows it.” He joked.

He was rewarded with a smile and a slight laugh. “Yeah, well.” Mal shrugged. “The whole thing has him more shaken than he’d like to admit.”

Dan sighed. “Yeah,” He murmured. “I bet.” He focused back on Mal. “How’ve you been?”

At their surprised face, he gave another twitch of a shrug. “Lee said you were the one who found

me.”

Mal crossed their arms, leaning back in their chair. “I believe you should be checking up on her, not me. Only one of us made you a tourniquet out of their suit jacket.”

Dan gave her a look over his glasses. “*Lee*,” He intoned, “Has a career centered around blood and bodies.” His face softened slightly. “She’s worried about you, too.”

Avoiding eye contact, Mal pulled a face. “I’m...coping.” They settled on. “Just glad you’re okay.” They looked back up, and grinned. Mal reached for the thermos, cracking it open and dipping the spoon inside. “Here comes the airplane,” They sang, nudging the utensil close to Dan’s face.

He groaned.

“I was wrong. This is the worst part of nerve damage.”

Mal laughed. “You want the soup, or not?”

He squinted. Lee had first made lapskaus for him when they were in college, and he’d come down with a nasty cold. He’d told her to stay away from him, and that he didn’t want to be getting her sick.

The bland, unimpressed face she’d pulled had quickly become one he associated with her. “I haven’t gotten sick since my cousins and I ate all that water hemlock.”

He had laughed.

She hadn’t.

Lee had made it a few more times, typically on colder days, and he swore it tasted even better every single time. Though it was the middle of August, the hospital still had that slight chill to it.

Dan sighed and let Mal stick the spoon in his mouth.

The humiliation was worth it.

Chapter End Notes

sword friendship sword friendship

bucky, upon finding out his crush is supposed to fucking murder him: worm?

percy was just kind of like :/ yikes. my b.

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Someone Who Gets It

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sunday, August 10th

3:23 PM

Stark Tower, NY

They'd been relaxing on the couches, Percy quietly engrossed in his work while Bucky flipped through news articles on the tablet Tony had gifted him. He was still making his way through the '90s, but he liked to think he was catching up fast.

Suddenly, Percy sat up straight. "I'm a fucking idiot," He announced.

Bucky gave him a wide eyed look. "What?"

Percy didn't respond, instead putting his laptop aside and briskly walking out of the room. Bucky watched him for a moment, bewildered, before shrugging and going back to his reading.

Ten minutes later, he walked back in.

"Hey, James. You want to meet my cousins?"

"What?"

"Two of my cousins are dropping by." He shrugged. "I think you'd like them."

"You're not...worried?"

There was something curled in Percy's smile that almost made Bucky wary. "Not in the slightest."

Bucky squinted. “This feels nefarious.”

That brought out a laugh. “It’s not, I swear. You guys just have a lot in common.”

He was just about to object, because really, what could he possibly have in common with Percy’s cousins? But then he remembered this was Percy he was dealing with, and his mind flashed back to the Pizza Whipped Cream Incident. Something about falsifying visas and stitching internal organs together was most definitely mentioned.

Sensing his consideration, Percy needled, “Besides, it’s good for you to meet new people.”

Bucky shot him a dirty look for that, but ultimately caved. “If you think it’s a good idea,” He said, resigned.

Which is how he ended up sitting on the couch across from two of the strangest people he’s ever met. Not in the top ten, considering the life he’s lived, but still quite odd.

The first one, who’d introduced himself as Nico, was lanky and pale, with shaggy black hair. He dressed in dark, muted colors, and twisted a skull ring around his finger. The woman, Hazel, was shorter, with strong shoulders, had her hair pulled back by a headband, paired with a pair of jeans with flowers embroidered on them and a hoodie.

Their eyes, though, were definitely the most interesting part.

Nico’s eyes were black. Not just dark in color, but purely black, the type that light didn’t reflect off of. Like liquidized shadows.

Hazel’s eyes were gold, as if someone had crafted them out of the molted metal itself.

In a way, they looked nothing alike. Hazel’s skin was darker than Percy’s, and Nico’s was much lighter. Hazel’s features were soft, and Nico’s were sharp, almost too sharp, giving him a slightly gaunt look.

But there was something about them that instantly made Bucky think of Percy. Maybe it was the

eyes, or the way that they held themselves, shoulders set and chins up, the strength in their strides and the assessing qualities of their gaze.

Like Percy, there was just *something* about them, something that he couldn't quite put in the words.

They were strange. He didn't mind.

Especially not when the first words said to him were, "Hi! I'm Hazel, Percy's cousin, and I was born in 1928."

At his surprised face, Nico's lips twisted into a slight grin. "1932, for me."

"1917." Bucky found himself saying.

They ended up talking for hours.

Bucky hadn't realized how much he missed being able to talk about stuff like this with Steve, until now. He never minded chatting with Ayo, Shuri, Tony, or Percy about what his life used to be like, not in the slightest. But it was so much more different when they actually got it.

Hazel was cheerful and kind, her wide smile and dimples reminiscent of her cousin. Nico was more reserved, but still a good conversation partner.

"The kids down the block would always get together and play card games," Bucky was saying. "Usually poker. Sometimes, one of them had this fancy deck, it had all these figures on it. Never got to play the game, though."

Nico hummed. "Figures?"

"Yeah. Like, monsters and stuff."

The man squinted. "Was it called Mythomagic?" Next to him, Hazel snickered under her breath.

Bucky nodded. “Yeah, that was it.”

Nico leaned back against the couch. “I used to be *obsessed* with that game. Nobody plays it now, these days.” He said regretfully. “Only other person I know who’s heard of it is Frank, Hazel’s boyfriend.”

Hazel’s laugh was bright and cheery. “They’ll play for hours, if you let them.”

Her brother lightly elbowed her in the ribs. “Shut up,” He muttered, the tips of his ears pink. Hazel, still smiling, looked back to Bucky. “We only met when we were teenagers, but, according to Percy, Mythomagic was all he talked about when he was a kid.”

Nico buried his face in his hands. “I hate you,” He mumbled.

She patted him on the back. “No you don’t.”

He sighed.

They talked about the things they missed, the things they enjoyed in this new century. About the war.

Hazel sighed. “My friend, Sammy, wanted to enlist.” Her voice took on a far away quality, tinged with melancholy. “We were just kids. He had no idea what he’d be getting into.” She shook her head. “He ended up serving for a few years. Then, he stayed in Houston until he died.” She gave a small shrug. “There are worse things, I suppose.”

Her brother put a silent hand on her arm, and she gave him a small smile. “We wanted to go to the Stark Expo together. We’d been saving up for tickets.”

Bucky’s face softened. “What happened?”

Hazel’s brow knitted, and she looked down at her knees. “My mother and I moved away, to

Alaska. I died there.”

Bucky inhaled quietly. “I’m sorry,” He said.

The woman looked up at him. After a second, a gentle smile overtook her face. “Nothing really fazes you, huh? No wonder Percy likes you so much.”

...Percy liked him?

He found himself echoing her smile. “When you’re a Hot Pocket of an assassin for a couple decades, nothing really seems impossible.”

Nico snorted softly. “It was a magic hotel, for me.” He shrugged. “Less traumatic, overall. It was quite strange to walk out the lobby to what seemed like a completely different city. I mean, I still thought FDR was president.”

“Magic hotel.” Bucky repeated, nodding. “Nice.”

“Yeah, I thought so at the time. I went in sometime in ‘43, I think. My family lived in Italy, but we moved to the U.S. when the war started. After my mom died, we went to D.C. Was enrolled in a boarding school for a while. We actually went to the Stark Expo on a field trip. Hazel made me tell her all about it when she found out.” He said.

Bucky noticed the tightness in his eyes when he mentioned his mother. He had an inkling that she didn’t die, so much as she was killed. And the pain, no matter how distant, was also there when he said *we*. Bucky knew he didn’t mean Hazel.

Instead, he raised his eyebrows. “You were at the Expo?”

Nico nodded. “Yeah. Saw the flying car prototype and everything.”

“I was there too!” Bucky exclaimed. “Gods, that car really was something.” He paused, realizing something. “Hell, we might’ve seen each other there.”

He got a snort in return. "If you were looking straight down, maybe." Hazel snickered.

Nico gave her a deadpan look. "I'm going to kill Percy." He declared.

She waved her hand dismissively. "You already failed at that."

He huffed at his sister. "Okay, first of all, I was like eleven. Second of all, I'm banning Percy from giving you access to the photo albums. I wasn't that short."

"Lovingly, Nico, you were five feet tall until you were fourteen."

Bucky watched the two of them with a bemused look. They were extremely at ease with one another, relaxed and angled towards each other as they spoke. They looked different as night and day, but clearly had a lot in common.

"You guys are close, I gather?" He said sarcastically.

The two broke out of their squabble, staring at him for a second as if they'd forgotten he was there. Hazel rubbed the back of her neck. "Sorry. And yeah. I mean, we're pretty close with all our cousins, but we've just always been more so with Percy."

Nico nodded. "I was...well, I was kind of a little shit when I was younger. I had a boat load of issues, and my dad..." He trailed off, pulling a face. "Well, he didn't really care much. When I was twelve, Percy'd apparently had enough of me just...being the way I was and forcibly dragged me to his apartment. His mom just about lost her mind when she found out I hadn't had an actual meal in months."

"*Being the way I was,*" Hazel mocked. "You hung out in graveyards and only ate McDonalds."

Nico ignored her. "He bullied me into going to school, held me down and got me vaccinated, and spent every Sunday taking me somewhere to introduce me to the century." He said, a wistful smile on his face.

“He did the same for me, too.” Hazel said. “He and Nico met when he was thirteen, and I met him when he was seventeen. We had some...stuff going on at the time, but afterwards, the three of us had regular movie weekends..” Her eyes shone. “The day he first took me to a Target, my life changed.”

Nico groaned. “Gods, not the Target again.”

She sniffed. “It was a holy experience, Neeks. Show some respect.”

He rolled his eyes so hard they could’ve fallen back into his head.

“Guess it makes sense why he was so good at catching me up on everything,” Bucky mused.

Hazel beamed at him. “You’re welcome.”

They’d talked for a full hour, though it’d passed in what felt like minutes. Nico eventually checked the clock and sighed. “I have to help my boyfriend set up his little half-sister’s birthday party.” He said. “Apparently, she wants a cake from some place in Oregon that I have to go retrieve.”

Bucky didn’t mention the fact that he knew it was well over a six hour flight to Oregon. He just smiled. “It was nice meeting you two.”

“You too, Bucky.” Hazel said. “It’s really nice knowing the two of us aren’t alone out there.”

Nico gave him a nod, and then the two went to track Percy down to say their goodbyes.

A few minutes later, the man poked his head into the common room. “Hey,” He said. “How was it?”

Bucky was silent for a second, then he stood up in one smooth motion, striding towards the doorway, and wrapping Percy in a hug. “Thank you,” He murmured. “I didn’t realize how much I needed that. Someone who *got it*.”

Percy's stunned still for a second, his arms at his sides. He snaps to it, circling his arms around his friend. "Glad I could help." He replies softly. Bucky leans into him for a second longer. Like always, Percy smells like the sea breeze, tinged with the calming scent of lavender.

He's never been more glad to have come to the tower.

BARF sessions are always tough. But there's nothing Bucky can do about them. The memories.

The lack of options is almost soothing. Reminding himself that everything he sees has already happened, that they can't be changed, and he just needs to pick himself up from there.

He stands and watches himself poison someone's drink, in and out of the building in less than a minute. From there, he crouches down and watches from the balcony, to make sure the job is done.

The man who drinks it is smiling and laughing with his companions. Two seconds later, he's choking and trembling. He hits the ground a moment later, and the Soldier turns away without a second thought.

He plants a bomb under a city bus. He shoots a man in the head while he's on a morning jog. He tracks down two rogue agents and slits their throats ear-to-ear.

Then, the Soldier is back at the Hydra facility, his eyes glazed over and spine stiff.

Karpov is speaking, but not to him. There's a woman in a lab coat, looking disdainfully down at a clipboard. He doesn't have to listen in to know what they're talking about. During a mission; he hesitated.

Just for a second.

He'd had the target all lined up in his sights. But the man had looked up at just the right moment, caught the glint of the metal under the bright sun. There was nothing he could do about it—there was a hole right between his eyes before he could even blink.

The target's eyes were blue. A soft, cornflower blue, framed by thick lashes. The Soldier had stared, and suddenly, the target was someone else.

He didn't know who.

Finally, Karpov rolled his eyes and snapped his fingers, turning away from the woman. The Soldier followed him down the hallways, the ones that were so, so familiar.

Down the stairs, to the sublevels. Everything was cold down there. Not even his gear could keep him fully warm, the chill creeping up under the kevlar and leather.

The glass doors of the labs. They were crystal clear. People had to come down and clean them multiple times a day.

One of the techs comes by, and they put their hand on his shoulder, start guiding him towards the center of the room, and the chair is there, with the headpieces and the metal straps, and they're shoving a rubber bit into his mouth so he doesn't *bite his own tongue off*—

The world tilts on its axis, lurching to the side, and everything goes dark.

He wakes up staring at the ceiling, the fluorescent lights making him squeeze his eyes shut as soon as they open.

There's a voice, panicked, to his left. To his right, there's a hand on his shoulder. The other hand is cupping the side of his face, tilting his head towards whoever was standing by him.

Bucky distantly registers the lights dimming. His ears are ringing, tuning out every other noise. He feels light, as if he's floating a few feet above his body. And he's cold. He can feel a breeze directly on him, coming from above. It makes him want to curl up, to tuck his face away and cover his hands with his ears because everything won't stop *ringing*—

The hand moves from his face to his hair, pushing it out of his eyes. Then simply brushing it back, nails scratching lightly against his scalp. It was a grounding motion, nice and steady. As the ringing slowly receded, he could hear clearer words.

“—the lights—”

“—his heartbeat—”

“—never happened before—”

Bucky let out a dragging groan. He opened his eyes again, and, fortunately, the room was significantly darker than it was before. He brought a hand to his forehead, a throbbing headache slowly taking form.

“Wha’ happened?” He asked, voice scratchy.

He was sitting in the chair (not *that chair*, this one was soft and had no armrests to strap him down to, the only thing attached to his head was a few pads and not anything that *hurt* and he was *fine—*), a very concerned Tony standing a few feet away from him. The man’s eyes were wide, and he was holding his tablet in hand.

Percy was next to him, too. Like, right next to him. Bucky hadn’t recognized until now that the warm thing he’d been leaning on was Percy. Percy, who had a hand running through his hair, the other on his shoulder, supporting him and keeping him from slumping over. Bucky’s head was leaning against his stomach, the faint scent of fabric softener tickling his nose.

Tony exhaled shakily. “You blacked out,” He said tightly. “We thought—I didn’t know it—,” He drops the tablet down on the table, and runs a hand through his hair. “Fuck, Barnes, I thought I’d fucking *killed* you.” The engineer’s lips are pressed tightly together, and he looks as unsteady as Bucky feels. “If Percy hadn’t been able to hear your heart beating—” Tony cuts himself off.

After a moment passed, Percy took over. “You were only out for a minute or so. And you don’t seem hurt, from what I can tell.”

Bucky had an inkling that what Percy could tell was a lot.

He didn't try to remove himself from Percy's hold, not with the memory of the ice that seeped into his bones so close to the surface. He opened his mouth to say something, anything, but the words died in his lips. He just shook his head.

Hesitantly, Tony asked, "Did you see anything? A...strong emotional response could have caused the reaction."

Mutely, Bucky nodded.

Tony nodded, a distinctly sad look on his face, but didn't ask.

Percy hadn't let go of him, all the way up to his apartment. Even when he deposited him down on the couch, Bucky could tell he was keeping an ear open from the kitchen.

After they ate, Percy tossed a blanket at him and in a tone that left no room for argument, told him he needed to rest. Bucky sighed, but complied, stretching across on the long couch. Percy sat across from him on the loveseat, legs crossed on the cushion, showcasing his neon socks that were oddly reminiscent of the carpet of a bowling alley. Bucky tried not to lament the loss of warmth the other man provided, wrapping the blanket tighter around himself.

"Your heart was all weird," Percy said it so softly, Bucky almost didn't hear him.

"What?"

Percy's eyes were wide in the worst way. He looked truly shaken; a rare expression for him. "Your heart. It...I've never heard someone's heart kick up like that. You..." The mutant frowned. "You were terrified."

Bucky worked his jaw in a circle. "Yeah," He allowed. "I was."

Percy nodded. Then, even quieter, "I hated it."

They sat in silence, after that.

Chapter End Notes

bucky making friends :) my man needed someone to go "well back in my day" to bc steves a little bitch

also to whoever asked for more cousin content like four months ago: this is for you <3

mythomagic HAS been around since the '40s thank you very much

percy was a stressed out parent to a child nico. he probably called up hades for child support or something. im making it canon.

"hE LiKeS mE?" bucky you dumb bitch THAT MAN WOULD DIE FOR YOU

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Cicero

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sunday, August 10th

7:47 PM

Stark Tower, NY

“Do you remember then?”

Percy blinked. “Who?”

Bucky cracked the knuckles of his right hand with his thumb. An idle habit of his, as it had been for over a century. “The people. In Ontario. Do you remember them all?”

It took a second, but the reply sent a pang through his heart. “More than I’d like,” Percy said softly. “Everything was...hazy. Blurry. But I remember exactly what it felt like to kill them all. Their screams, how fast their hearts were going.” His brow furrowed. “Nine months later, and the exact sound their bodies made when they hit the ground replays in my head every time I go to sleep.”

Bucky didn’t offer his condolences—he knew all too well Percy wouldn’t want them.

“I want to remember,” Bucky said quietly. “I know it’d be awful; it already is. But I think forgetting all about them would be worse.”

Percy tilted his head consideringly. “Maybe,” He agreed. “Maybe.”

They lapsed into silence after that. Bucky went back to his book—one of the ones Ayo, Shuri and the rest of the Dora had given him. Life had been so chaotic recently that he hadn’t really had time to pick them up and get back into them.

Now that everything was calming down, though, he figured he should get back to it.

Tony had been acting a little off lately. Bucky knew it was about the last BARF session, but didn't really know what to do to *fix* it. The guilt in the inventor's eyes was as easy to read as the pages sitting in Bucky's lap.

It was strange—Bucky had never imagined that Tony Stark would ever be the one harboring some guilt between the two of them.

As much as he tried to focus on his reading, his mind kept wandering, floating away from the print. Every session always brought back a few memories of his missions. And for the days afterwards, and what felt like the nights forevermore, they echoed through his head, ghosts long since dead making their return to finally haunt him.

Bloodied faces and slit throats, entry wounds right in between the eyes and pools of blood underneath heads. Every time he closed his eyes, they stared back at him, eyes empty but accusing at the same time.

Sometimes they spoke. Sometimes they didn't.

He still wasn't sure what he preferred.

Hoarse screaming, watery pleading, or vengeful words dripping with poison. That, or the silence. The kind of stillness that was so oppressive it felt heavy, the kind where the only noise was Bucky's own breathing and traitorous heartbeat, still beating when it should have stopped almost a century ago at the bottom of a ravine.

It was completely different, other times. When they were just vague indents, shapes of memories that he couldn't quite solidify, slipping through his fingers like smoke. He remembered the feeling of a small windpipe crushing under his too-strong hands, but not the face or the name or the *why*—

Then again, Hydra didn't really always need a reason.

"That was a dramatic sigh,"

He looked up for a second, his eyes drifting to Percy, as they often did. The man's eyebrows were

raised, and he had taken one of his earbuds out.

Bucky rolled his eyes slightly. “My bad.”

Percy grinned a little, but there was concern slipping through his easy-going expression. “You alright?”

He worked his jaw. “Prob’ly not,”

In response, Percy just leaned forward, taking his other earbud out. Bucky let out a puff of air through his lips and tipped his head back.

“I read a lot in Wakanda,” He starts with. “They had a lot of books there, new stuff, stuff I didn’t have access to as a kid. It’s mainly what I did all day when I wasn’t in the lab with Shuri.” Wistfully, he adds, “God, Percy, the royal library was beautiful. There was probably a copy of every single book ever written in there. They had books copied from the *Library of Alexandria*, Perce.”

The smile that splits open his face is soft and full of wonder. “Really?”

“Yeah. Shit was amazing. Everything was so well preserved—I have no clue how they did it. I ended up stumbling upon a copy of *The Philippics*, and—” He cut off, shaking his head, searching for the right phrase. Then, slowly, “‘*The life of the dead is placed in the memory of the living.*’” He quoted.

“Marcus Tullius Cicero,” Percy finished. “The Roman statesman that was assassinated and got his head and hands nailed to the Rostra.”

It seemed Percy Jackson would always surprise him, Bucky noted. “I didn’t know you liked history,”

Something flashed across Percy’s face that Bucky couldn’t name. Then, he smiled; a slight little thing, his lips curled in a way that indicated there was more to it than he said. “Just Greco-Roman stuff, really.”

Bucky nodded absently, then sighed. “How can that be true if I can’t even remember most of their names?”

Percy was silent for a moment, seemingly collecting his words. “Well,” He said carefully, “You’ll remember eventually. Tony said you only have a few more sessions left. You get more and more back with every one.” He reminded. “And even if you don’t, other people remember them.”

“I suppose,” Bucky conceded after a second. Percy was right—by the end of all of this, there probably wasn’t going to be a single name he could ever forget.

That was both a good thing, and one of the worst things that he could think of.

Percy waved his hand. “No more existentialism.” He declared. “What are you going to do after? BARF, I mean.” He clarified. “Are you going to stay with us?”

Bucky momentarily faltered at the change of topic. “I...I don’t know,” He admitted. “I guess I haven’t really thought about it.” The truth was, and he was never going to tell Percy this, he didn’t really think he was going to make it through. The chance of being free from the Soldier was a dream, one that, to him, was never going to be a reality.

But now, after moving to Stark Tower and actually making it through the sessions, he was face to face with the fact that, for the first time in eighty years, James Barnes got to decide what to do *after*.

Percy shrugged. “World’s your oyster, James. You deserve it.” He grinned, and raised his eyebrows. “You could be an Avenger,”

Bucky snorted. “I...don’t think I’m the ideal public figure. Not really my place.”

He waved his hand. “Oh, I’m sure everyone would love your surly, brooding, unagreeable attitude.” Bucky threw a pillow at him and it hit right in the middle of his face. Percy flipped him off. “Asshole. I take it back. You’re the worst.”

Percy seemed to be holding something back, though. He put the pillow on the couch next to him, and worried the inside of his cheek between his teeth. Then, hesitantly, he said, “Well, SWORD’s team lead is a bit of a disaster, and he has his moments, but...” He shrugged a little, the tips of his

ears pink. “I think he’d be glad to have you.”

Bucky would deny the fact that he was beaming until the day he died. “You think so?”

“If that’s what you want, I mean,” Percy said, picking at the edge of his sweater sleeve.

And, for the oddest reason, Bucky didn’t think he’d ever wanted anything more.

But...

The chair.

Every time he got close to seeing it, to reliving it, he jerked himself out of the session. For fucks sake, the last time he’d gotten close to it, he’d induced some sort of cardiovascular event in himself and scared the shit out of Percy.

He knew he had to get over it, eventually.

Get over the chair. Finish the sessions.

Tell someone the trigger words.

Then he could *move on*.

He’d shoved that last part out of his mind since the day Shuri had told him about it; to the deepest, dustiest corners. He trusted Tony and Percy, sure. But that much?

Could he really trust anyone *that much*?

Sunday, August 11th

10:28 AM

New York Presbyterian Queens Hospital

He was doing better, he reminded himself.

Today, he'd moved his neck and head without a single twinge of pain while Lee did his hair, pulling it back into a short tail at the base of his neck. When all the others showed up, he jerkily lifted up an arm so Mal could shove into the space next to him. He fed himself.

He was doing better.

But every time he tried to shift his whole body, to stretch his legs out or use the television remote, it didn't really feel like it.

Lee was looking at him out of the corner of her eyes. Her brow was furrowed, the expression miniscule in a way that had taken Dan a good few years to decode. Concern twisted her mouth, gaze questioning.

He gave her his best smile.

She didn't look convinced, but turned back to the movie anyway, which he appreciated.

They were watching *Sharknado*, of all things. The effects were awful, the story unbelievable and cheesy. Mal was pressed up against him in the small bed, accidentally elbowing him every time they went for the popcorn bowl. Aspen had their dirty boots propped up on the foot of the bed, undoubtedly staining the blankets. Ross had pulled up a chair, only half paying attention to the movie in favor of taking every BuzzFeed quiz that he saw. Lee was sitting on the loveseat that the'd pushed away from the wall, Bridgette laying in between her stretched out legs, head on Lee's chest.

It was easily one of the best times he'd had. Which, sounded really depressing, actually.

Maybe it was just the fact that everyone was here, whole and safe. That just for a bit, they could put all their baggage and stress down in favor of a shitty movie.

He leaned his head back against the wall.

He was getting better.

Monday, August 12th

3:28 AM

Stark Tower, NY

“Are you sure?”

Percy was standing on freshly waxed floors, the lemony scent wafting around the room. It was a fairly large room; high ceilings, wide, arched windows.

He took a step forward, only to realize he was still in his pajamas as his bare feet hit a plush, soft carpet.

“Yes. It’s the best way.”

He could smell wood polish, hear the air conditioner running in the ceiling above, trying to stave off the August heat. There was no rattle, no pained sound coming from the ventilation like the ones he was used to. This place was well kept, then.

Papers were scattered across the room, the ones next to the vents rustling softly. He moved to the desk, running his fingers across the edge of a crisp manilla folder. There was ink, but it was far too old for him to get any sort of mental picture. The only times he could really read ink was when it was fresh; even a few hours could deteriorate it.

“What of the others?”

The man’s voice was hard. Low, stern, in a way that reminded Percy of the drill sergeants from the Legion. But...colder, somehow.

“Unfortunate casualties.” He said decisively.

The other voice was hesitant. “If...if you’re sure, sir.”

Percy woke up with a start.

Mrs. O’Leary wormed her way into his lap, and he automatically wrapped his arms around her, burying his face in her fur. She gave a questioning whine, leaning against him, a comfortable and familiar weight.

He exhaled heavily. “I don’t know, Lea. But...” He shook his head against her. “Something’s wrong.”

Monday, August 12th

2:41 PM

Midtown School of Science and Technologies

They’d been practicing even harder since August began, preparing for the oncoming school year. Peter didn’t mind it that much; he had fun in AcDec. The material was fun, occasionally challenging. He got to see Ned, MJ, and all the other members.

Flash still sucked, though.

Luckily for him, MJ’s glare of death typically kept him at bay. The one day she had been absent,

Cindy and Charles had situated themselves on either side of Flash, ‘accidentally’ slamming their elbows into his ribs with all their might whenever he said something out of line.

Peter loved his friends.

Ned leaned over to him, voice quiet. “What was he like?”

“What?”

“Barnes.” MJ said from behind them. “You have a nasty habit of only giving us the bare bones, Parker.”

He ducked his head. “Sorry.” He looked up at Ned. “He was nice.” He said honestly. “Really nice. Not what I expected, I guess.”

Ned hummed. “Your spidey sense didn’t go off at all?”

“A little. It’s hard to explain.”

MJ raised an unimpressed eyebrow.

Peter sighed. “It’s, like...a little buzz when someone can hurt me, you know? It doesn’t bother me at all. Like someone tapping you on the shoulder. He set that off. But so does PJ, so does Mr. Stark, and a bunch of other people, too.” Peter explained. “It feels different with intent. When someone wants to hurt you, and *can*. It’s like having cold water dumped over your head. Makes all your hairs stand on end, your muscles tense up and your heart kick up. He doesn’t set that off.”

Both of them listened with rapt attention, and Peter belatedly realized he never really talked about what having a sixth sense was like. He’d talked about what it could do, but never really what it felt like.

“Sergeant Barnes doesn’t want to hurt me. That’s for sure. But if it was the Soldier...” Peter cut off. “Well, there’s always that little buzz in the back of my head, of *potential*. It’s different from Mr. Stark, who could hurt me but never would. Somehow, I just know he could. He doesn’t want

to, but he could, and he might.”

MJ stared at him intently. Then, “You can tell all that from your Peter Tingle?”

“First off, don’t call it the Peter Tingle. And second, yes, yes I can.”

“Freaky.”

He rolled his eyes. “Thanks.”

Chapter End Notes

early update B)

bucky: oh you like greek/roman history?

percy, sweating: uhhhhhhhhh

bucky nerd rights

also i did the math. i crunched the numbers. it's completely possibly wakanda has books copied from the library of alexandria.

originally this scene was in percy's pov but i switched it, but figured you guys deserved these

"Oh, I'm sure everyone would love your surly, brooding, unagreeable attitude." Percy said lightly. 'Like I do,' He wanted to add.

“What are you going to do after? BARF, I mean.” He clarified. “Are you going to stay with us?” With me?

anyways.

"Could he really trust anyone that much?" yes bitch

ok now's the time to tell you guys how much i fucking love the sharknado movies. at first i was upset about the shark rep, cause those guys are just little squishy boys, but. i realized anyone who takes shark facts from sharknado is the type of person who would die in a sharknado so.

anyways. i love all six movies and i watch them every day.

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Footsteps

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tuesday, August 13th

8:41 PM

Wade was worried.

He'd known Percy for a couple of years, and, in those years, he liked to think he'd gotten a pretty good understanding of the man.

Wade knew he himself was far too young for the business he was in, twenty-five at the time, but Percy had been twenty-one when they met. Not even old enough to have graduated college, for most people.

Despite the fact that he was the right age to be filmed having his first drink, Percy had walked around like the world itself balanced on his shoulders. The more Wade had learned about him, the more he realized just how accurate that assessment was.

It was soon after their op in Italy when something had tracked Percy down.

To this day, the picture was still fuzzy. Wade knew what it was; Percy had told him, described them in vivid detail. But when Wade looked back on that moment, it was distantly vague, like he was watching it through frosted glass.

Fifteen minutes later, Percy had stumbled away, a cut on his side and shaking golden dust from his hair.

"...It's a long story." He'd said.

Which, to be fair, it was.

The difference between Percy when he was part of SHIELD versus when he was acting as a mercenary was startling.

SHIELD had weighed him down. Percy wasn't made to be that kind of person; killing people on the orders of a man who spent his days reclining in an air conditioned office. SHIELD made him pretend.

Agent Jackson had a mask, carefully constructed for the world to see. Agent Jackson was brusque, cold, and had no personal life he felt safe sharing. He kept his head down and took his orders like he was swallowing down something sour.

Agent Jackson was many things; but most of all, he was a normal, abled person. He was *not* Enhanced. He couldn't afford to be.

Becoming Deathstroke was good for him.

With Wade's help, along with another one of Percy's friends, a Captain Johnson—who was actually quite delightful—, he had a suit and a name. Deathstroke was a shadow, a ghost story whispered in the night. He was quiet and, despite the name, had an air of gentleness about him that astounded Wade.

Deathstroke was *free*.

Wade had asked, once. "Why a mercenary?"

Percy had just shrugged. "My family," He said honestly. "We need money we don't have." Then, his gloved fist tightened. "And, well...I'm trying to do some good."

Which he had.

There was no truer version of someone than when they were under a mask, as ironic as it was. And when Percy got a mask? He spent his days hunting down missing persons and taking out traffickers for mere *pennies* in the merc world.

On a visit to Ulaanbaatar , they'd gotten word about a group of kidnappers, snatching kids on their way home from school.

A group of parents had scraped together all their savings and approached Deathstroke, offering up anything and everything they had to hire him to save their children.

Percy had stood over them, then slowly shook his head. He pushed the outstretched hand, clutching a fistfull of bills, back towards a mother. She had misunderstood, at first, and her face crumpled.

To the man next to her, the only one who spoke Russian along with Mongolian, Percy said, "No charge. Tell her. Tell all of them."

The man had stared, wide eyed, but relayed the message.

The ragtag group of parents had given a collective sob in relief.

And again, when their children were brought home to them the next day.

They tried to pay him. Percy just shook his head.

He wasn't a merc for long. But Wade found it hilarious and also unbelievably endearing that, in that time, less than *two years*, he'd turned the name *Deathstroke* into a legend, a vengeful wraith who held a special grudge against those who hurt children. A protector of the young.

So Wade was understandably worried when he told him he was going to work for Tony Stark.

He knew Percy always repaid his debts; Iron Man had saved his family's life, and Percy needed to repay the favor.

Which, he did.

And he stayed.

Wade didn't understand it, at first.

But then, when Percy would aimlessly talk about his day, it struck him.

It was Percy Jackson and his bleeding heart. Percy, who formed an entire government organization to prevent anything like Johnson's death to happen ever again. Who stayed, despite the oppression of Enhanced, despite having to hide himself *again*, because he truly didn't believe anyone else would do what he did.

A fair assessment, really.

The SWORD team was important to Percy. And, based on, like, everything that had happened in the past few years, the chances that somebody extremely shady would try to worm their way into SWORD was undoubtedly high.

Percy was good at his job. The lie detecting powers and "dog" made him uniquely qualified.

He was happy at SWORD, despite it all. Somehow, Percy was happy.

That didn't mean Wade didn't worry.

Because SWORD was getting to be quite the thorn in the sides of certain powerful people. The team was tenacious and thorough. Wade was honestly surprised nobody had approached him with a contract to off the team already.

Percy was messing with some very powerful people. Wade had warned him, just once. In response, Percy had gotten this gleam in his eyes, and said, "I've done worse."

Wade shook his head to dispel the memories. He took a step forward, boots crunching on the gravel. It was still light out, the summer stretching out the days longer and longer. It's cooler than it was earlier in the day, but still uncomfortably warm.

His footsteps echo across the empty shipping yard. Normally, Wade would take some steps to prevent that, but, well...

It's not like anyone else would hear them.

He unsheathed his katana, and crouched down, leveling the blade under the quivering man's neck.

"Now," Wade said cheerfully. "What do you know about Subject C-4?"

The man whimpered.

Tuesday, August 14th

1:08 AM

Stark Tower, NY

His mouth tastes like ash.

It's a feeling that's far too familiar, and he forces down the gag that automatically surfaces.

Wherever he is, it's warm. Far too warm to be natural summer weather. It's sweltering; he can feel himself start to sweat a little. He can't imagine what it would be like for someone without his natural resistance to the heat.

The ringing in his ears is deafening, and he works his jaw around in an attempt to dispel it. He tries to put a hand to his ear to check for blood on instinct, but finds himself unable to move his arm. He doesn't feel trapped; but he just knew that he couldn't move.

Then he smells the blood.

It's coming from so many different directions, it makes him even dizzy.

His eyes burn, ash and dust particles making him blink furiously.

There's a cut on his lip, stinging every time he grimaces.

Percy's nose twitches.

Something is poking at him, drifting around right at the edge of his consciousness. There's something familiar, aching so.

But he just can't put his finger on it.

He knows that scent, the detergent and the shampoo and something completely unique. He knows that heartbeat.

But he just can't remember who.

It's agony, trying to force up a memory that won't come. He knows that person, who's so close to him, and he wants to call out, to say something, but the thought of even trying to speak sends a wave of exhaustion through him in a way he hasn't felt in years.

Whoever they are, they're laying flat on their back, coughing up dust and ash so hard he can feel their ribs creak.

And there's other people, too.

Five of them.

Their hearts are beating fast, and their breathing is shaky.

Percy feels the quakes before he hears them.

The ground vibrates under his feet, and he can feel it deep in his bones. He doesn't lose his footing, thank the Gods. Quakes and the like have never affected him; and, for some reason, he feels if he loses his footing, something very bad is going to happen.

Footsteps.

Great, booming footsteps, coming right at them.

It's scarily reminiscent of the Giant King, Porphyron, barreling down on Percy, hunting him down as he tore through the Acropolis.

Another loud boom. Another small quake in the ground.

Percy flinches.

Something groans dangerously.

He can almost feel the spear going through his gut, running him through as if he was a piece of tissue paper and not the son of a God. That sense of insignificance, just another mortal felled by the King, the acceptance that hit him before he even hit the marble.

The ground drinking in his blood, sizzling upon contact.

Piper had told him that, like hers, it had turned gold.

He hadn't known that, but he had felt it change. The instant his blood had met earth, it suddenly wasn't his own.

It, like so many other things, belonged to the Earth Mother, now,

Percy squeezed his eyes shut.

The steps grew closer.

Percy bolted up so fast that he almost headbutted Bucky square in the nose.

Bucky barely dodged, moving to the side to give Percy room to breathe. He looked like he needed it.

He'd been asleep himself when Mrs. O'Leary had jumped atop of him, nipping at his sides with a sense of urgency that had him on his feet in seconds. She'd grabbed the hem of his shirt with her teeth, tugging at him until he followed her out of his bedroom.

A few paces later he realized that if Mrs. O'Leary had come to get him in the middle of the night in the way she had, something was very wrong, and it was most likely with Percy.

He broke out into a sprint.

The front door to his apartment was wide open, and Bucky barged in without a second thought. He pinpointed Percy's heartbeat in less than a second, running towards his room.

The man twisting and turning in his sleep, his breaths sharp and short. His hair was plastered to his forehead, skin covered in a light sheen of sweat. And he was curled in on himself, seemingly protecting his stomach, knees tucked up and arms wrapped around his torso.

Bucky gripped his arm. "Percy, you need to wake up." He urged. "You're having a nightmare. You need to wake up." He repeated.

For a second, there was no response, shooting a bolt of concern through Bucky. Then, Percy bolted

up like he'd been electrocuted. Bucky's hand was still wrapped around his upper arm, and he could feel the tremors running through the other man. Percy's arm not scrubbing at his face was tightly around his stomach. His eyes were wide and red-rimmed.

He was crying.

Tears fell freely down his cheeks, and he wiped at them harshly with the sleeve of his sweatshirt.

Should he leave? Move, at the very least, and give him some more space. Before he could even shift his weight, Percy's hand gripped his metal one, holding so tight his knuckles went white.

Bucky's heart twisted, and he moved to sit fully on the bed, crossing his legs under him. His hand moved from Percy's arm to his shoulders in a secure hold, pulling him closer. Percy shifted towards him, still curled in on himself. His breaths were ragged and shaking, like he was still fighting for air.

Percy's lips moved like he was going to say something, but got cut off every time with a series of tremors wracking his body.

Whatever he had dreamt about, it had been bad. Awful enough to steal the breath from his lungs, the words from his lips.

Bucky straightened his legs out, pulling Percy closer to his side. Not much snuck by Bucky these days; he noticed whenever Percy was stressed, Tony typically went in for some kind of physical contact. Hazel and Nico, when they had been in the same room with Percy, were practically attached to his side. Percy was a physical person, with his friends and his family.

He was proved right when Percy leaned into him, the side of his face pressed against Bucky's collar. Percy was, as always, warm as a furnace.

They stayed like that for a while; Bucky keeping his grip firm around him, Percy trying to regain control of his breathing.

In the meantime, Bucky's eyes drifted around. He'd never seen Percy's room before. Somehow, it looked exactly how he was expecting.

There was a small collection of books on the shelf built into the wall, plants dotted around various surfaces. A sword was hung up on his wall above the desk, which was littered with papers. His computer and a pair of headphones sat atop a pile of folders. His boots were by the door, and a sweater was hanging over the back of his desk chair.

Against his side, Percy let out a quivering breath. “Sorry,” He said, voice quiet. Bucky didn’t need to guess what he was apologizing for.

Bucky looked down at him. “Don’t be.” He squeezed gently. “You’d do the same for me.”

Percy chewed on the inside of his cheek. “It’s—It’s just—” He swallowed. “Dreams.”

It took Bucky a second to realize what he meant, and he wanted to kick himself.

Prophetic dreams.

He’d imagined they’d be far worse than nightmares, and he was right.

“I think this one was real, James.” Percy whispered. “It’s hard to tell, sometimes, but...” He shook his head. “Sometimes, during them, I just get these feelings. Pure dread,”

He didn’t need to look up at Bucky for him to know that Percy’s eyes were piercing. “Something really bad is going to happen, James. Soon.”

Chapter End Notes

i figured wade can know about demigods cause like. that man's not mortal. what's it gonna do. kill him?

wade going batshit and hunting down everyone who may be involved with hurting percy <3 <3

me writing percy's foreboding dream sequences: >:)

buckle up, lads. shit's gonna get real.

plumbing baby. goodbye.

The Raft

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tuesday, August 14th

10:43 AM

Stark Tower, NY

Tony tried his best to smile. It was a weak thing, weighing heavy on him. Bucky looked up at him, eyes questioning.

“The scans look good, Bucky.” He said, something in his chest settling at how the man’s eyes lit up. “I think one more session should do it. It worked much faster than we expected.”

Seated next to the super soldier, Percy grinned, nudging Bucky with his elbow. “You hear that? One more!” He echoed.

Bucky turned to look at Percy, a smile finally making its way onto his face. “One more,” He repeated. “One more.”

Tony watched the two, something undeniable soft in his gaze. After a second, he turned away, retreating further into the lab, towards his work station. The scans really did look good—Tony had to give it to Bucky, because that was undoubtedly his doing. There was an undeniable strength in Bucky Barnes, and Tony found himself learning to appreciate it.

BARF was in no way pleasant. When Tony had tested it on himself, the things he saw had left him anywhere from itching to restock the liquor cabinet for the first time in years, to a shaking mess gasping for air like a man drowning.

To have memories, especially ones like Barnes was experiencing, had to be beyond awful.

But the man still did it, even as the rest periods between sessions shrunk and shrunk.

Voices; Bucky's low timbre and Percy's soft rasp were a background noise, words blurring together with the distance between them. It was nice, Tony found. Different from Peter's excited chatter, Pepper's soft, steady words, or Rhodey's calm, dry voice.

It felt warm, deep inside his chest.

Tony flicked through a series of charts, taking in each one for a second before moving to the next. Behind him, there was a soft shifting noise.

"—be fine," Percy was saying.

"I...it's the chair, Percy. Every time. I can barely breathe when I think about it, let alone see it. I just *can't*."

Tony heard the rustling of clothes, like Percy had moved towards him. "Hey," The demigod said. "You'll get it next time. It's all that's left; then you'll be done." Then, softer, "I believe in you, James."

How somebody like Percy, built from blood and pain, forged in storms and battles, could sound so gentle, was lost on Tony.

Bucky seemed to think so, too, if the quiet exhale he gave was any indication. "You think so?"

Not a single beat of hesitation. "I do."

Suddenly, Tony felt like he was intruding. He shook himself, and went right back to his reading, deliberately tuning out the conversation behind him as he got sucked back into his work.

The scans did look fantastic, after all.

Percy never hesitated, not when it came to people.

He was so sure of himself about Bucky, about Tony and Peter and his family. It baffled him, honestly, that this man had so much faith in the people around him, despite everything he'd been through.

There wasn't a single second of uncertainty in his face as he laid his hand over Bucky's. Both his hands. Percy didn't seem to mind touching his metal arm, even though he could sometimes barely bear to look at it himself. He threaded his fingers through Bucky's like he hadn't crushed windpipes and shot thousands of rounds, like he wasn't something that people were *scared of*.

"I believe in you, James," Percy had said, face so earnest it was painful.

Bucky suddenly found tears pricking at his eyes, and he ducked his head.

God, this could all be *over*. No more looking over his shoulder, the ghost of the trigger words following him wherever he went. No more waking up and double checking the date, making sure he wasn't missing any time. No more looking at every person he met and wondering if he would kill them.

Percy's hand squeezed his. "Nobody's ever going to control you like that again," He swore. "Never again."

As naive as it was, Bucky looked up at him. "Promise?" He asked, voice breaking.

"I swear it," Percy says. "With everything I have."

And something in Bucky just *breaks*. He's slumping forward into Percy before he even knows it, and Percy's arms come up around his shoulder, tugging him in close, and Bucky buries his face into Percy's sweatshirt. It smells like him, an airy sea breeze and fresh lavender.

Percy accepts contact like it comes natural to him, bracing a strong arm across his back and tugging his hair back with the other. It's strange to Bucky, who's so used to the only touch he received being from the people standing over him in lab coats, their touches cold and clinical. It's nothing like Percy, who's warm enough to chase away the chill that's been bone-deep in Bucky since that day he fell off the train.

When he pulls away, he's only slightly embarrassed to see a wet patch against Percy's collar. He's not sure why Percy's oath means so much to him; he's just one man, after all. But there's just something in his voice, something unquantifiable, that makes Bucky believe, down to his core, that he's going to be fine.

Bucky's sitting back, staring up at the ceiling, his thoughts drifting freely.

He's going to have to tell someone the trigger words.

When he first learned that, he thought of Shuri, Ayo, maybe even Steve.

But now, he reflects, they're all second choices. He looks down, at the mutant curled up on the couch next to him, his face half hidden in his sweatshirt, hair sticking up every which way.

Bucky doesn't trust a lot of people.

He thinks he trusts Percy.

Wakanda had been a breath of fresh air. Somewhere he could wake up and not immediately begin packing up to move to the next place, always on the run. He wandered the palace and spent time in the library, got to talk to Ayo and Shuri.

But there was always that tension there. The way Romanoff eyed Steve when he wasn't looking, how Barton's lip curled when he was in the same room as Maximoff. How even Lang—cheerful, bright Lang—had shaken his head and said, "I messed up."

It was calm in Wakanda, but only on the surface.

But in the Tower? Once they broke through that first layer of ice, when they began to ease up around each other? It was what Wakanda wasn't.

There were no side-eyes, no barely concealed snarls, no venomous words snipped from one to another.

Percy baked cookies and left them in Tony's labs and at Bucky's door, Tony dragged Bucky to whatever workstation he was at to show him something cool, Bucky happily curled up on the couch with Mrs. O'Leary on the couch to watch movies.

He liked it here.

Maybe too much.

He sighs, running his tongue across his teeth. Bucky's so deep in his thoughts that he barely notices when Percy's heartbeat, which had been strong, steady and slow, begins to pick up.

On instinct, he moves forward, grabbing him by the shoulder. Percy doesn't even react, heart thudding louder and louder in his chest.

Like last time, he wakes all on his own, coming to with a ragged inhale. Bucky backs off immediately, allowing him to sit up.

He's not as shaky as last time, no trembling lip or wet eyes. Instead, his face is blank, almost empty. In his face, there's something completely otherworldly, like nothing he's never seen before. "We're too late," Percy whispers.

To their left, from the coffee table, his phone rings.

FRIDAY gives him an urgent summons to the common room, her tone uncharacteristically frantic. Tony just about drops everything he's doing and hightails it to the elevator.

When he gets to the common room, Bucky and Percy are sitting on the couch, Mrs. O'Leary between them. Percy's hair is still sticking up at odd ends, the imprint of the couch cushion on his

cheek. Despite that, he looks wide awake, clutching that old flip phone in his hand.

“He’s here,” Percy says.

“Fantastic,” The voice, that Tony clearly recognizes as *motherfucking Deadpool*, says. “So, listen. I was looking into all that shit you told me about, Perce, and, well,” He lets out a breath. “That Integrity thing, that funded Dr. Stark’s attempted murder? That’s probably *extremely* connected to literally everything else that’s gone wrong? I did some light persuasion, and got into the account.”

The silence was charged, like static biting at his skin.

“Percy, someone just withdrew almost fifty million dollars from it.”

If he thought it was quiet before, that was nothing compared to the hush that fell over the room.

Tony wracks his brain, trying to think of what could possibly be worth *fifty million dollars* . Certainly not just a hit; for fucks sake, it cost half a million to try kill an *Avenger* in the middle of a gala.

Bribes? Weapons? Transport? Some muscle?

...Or, maybe, all of the above.

He doubts there will be a direct attack on Stark Tower. It’s too messy; thousands of people in the building, thousands more out on the streets. Not to mention the security, the defenses, and the slightly bloodthirsty AI.

The SWORD members are scattered around the city; they’ll be decently hard to track down fast enough to not raise alarms. Pepper is in the tower, Rhodey is all the way in DC. Percy and Bucky are right in front of him—

Peter.

Oh, God. *Peter* .

Percy seems to reach the same conclusion as he does, and his face turns into one of horror. He stands up, lips parted, eyes wide, but before he can even say anything, FRIDAY's voice meets their ears.

"Boss, we have a problem."

The TV turns on, channel flipped to a news station. A woman was standing in front of the camera, a microphone in hand. The Atlantic is to her back, the sky darkened with ash, deep in the background. "—unknown cause. We currently have no word on the number of inmates that have escaped, but due to the significant damage within, we can only assume—"

Tony's eyes leave the woman's face, drifting down to the chyron at the bottom of the screen. In bold letters, impossible to ignore, the words ***EXPLOSION AT SECRET FACILITY*** jump out at him.

Behind the news anchor, the Raft creaks and groans.

"We are getting reports that the facility is now taking on water, and an evacuation is in affect—"

Tony's mouth goes dry. Fifty million, huh?

"It's currently unknown just what exactly this building is, or how long it has been in use,—"

"What is it? What's going on?" Percy's voice jumps out. His brow is drawn, a panic set into his features. Tony kicks himself—despite the circumstances, he should never forget that Percy can't read the screen.

"The Raft," He says hoarsely. "Someone just blew a hole in it." Slowly, he turns back to the TV. "Toomes," He whispers.

"Who?" It's Bucky who asks, this time.

Tony's heart picks up. "Adrian Toomes. Chitauri weapons dealer. Peter took him down last year. He knows who he is, Percy. Toomes *knows who he is.*"

Wade speaks up from the phone, and Tony startles, almost having completely forgotten he was there. "I think we've got more problems than that, Dr. Stark. Because I'm tapped into the system pretty deep, and an alert just went up—half a million for anyone who can bring Spider-Man's head to them."

"Oh my God." Tony whispers. "Is his identity up there?"

A pause. "No. Clients don't release information like that out wide. They give it to the people accepting the job." Another beat of silence. "Which they will be, very, *very* soon. You need to take this down, *now.*" He adds urgently.

Tony is already moving. "Fri!" He yells.

He's halfway to the elevator before turning back. "Peter's at school. With his AcDec team. I—I can't be in two places at once."

Percy nods. "I'll go. You get that Godsdamned ad taken down." He turns towards Bucky. "You... You shouldn't stay here on your own. If Integrity is related to this, Hydra might be too."

As much as he hates it, Bucky agrees. "I don't think me going with you to the school is a good idea, either."

Tony is still hesitating halfway into the elevator. Percy frantically waves him off. "We'll figure it out. *Go.*" And he doesn't need to be told twice, already getting FRIDAY to pull up everything he needs down in the labs.

Back in the common room, Percy is pacing. Stark Tower is protected, sure. From external threats. What he's more worried about is the Soldier. Gods *fucking* damnit, they were only one session away. One session.

A bolt of inspiration strikes. "The SWORD facility," He says. "That place can be locked down like

the Pentagon. I can call everyone back there. It's our best option."

Bucky is already nodding.

The elevator ride has never seemed so long.

They step out into the garage, and Percy is already pulling a pair of keys out of his pocket. Bucky shoots him a baffled and mildly concerned look as they get into the car; the last one on the left. Percy just shrugs as the engine roars to life. "FRIDAY's a great driver." He says. "Oh, and Fri?"

The car seems to hum in response.

"Speed."

Bucky buckles his seatbelt.

As the car peels out of the garage, the speedometer steadily crawling up, Bucky takes a minute to look over at Percy. His jaw is set, brow knitted in deep worry. The harsh sunlight, blazing through even the tinted windows, casts a glow around him that he seems to soak in. He's stiff, digging the nail of his thumb into the side of his pointer finger.

He didn't realize how often he enjoyed Percy looking happy, *calm*, until he wasn't anymore.

Bucky sighs, leaning forward, bracing an elbow against his knee as the car pulls onto one of the main roads.

He really should've known that whatever peace he'd found wouldn't have lasted.

He can't help but remember, back in Wakanda, before the idea of BARF has even passed Shuri's lips. The Stark Gala, the princess mentioning it offhandedly as she worked on his arm.

"*The guard. What happened?*" Bucky had asked.

And after she told him, he'd raised his eyebrows and privately thought, *wow, who the fuck would take three bullets for their boss?*

Percy wouldn't. He knew that, now. Not for his boss, but his friend.

That day, walking in on Romanoff and Barton huddled around that computer, watching a rerun of the Gala. Three pairs of critical eyes trained not on the speaker, but on his guard standing in the background. As Percy lunged forward a millisecond before the bullets were fired, how he didn't hesitate. Like he *knew*.

"*Could he be a mutant of some sort? Maybe that's how he knew.*" Bucky had asked, eyes narrowed at the screen.

Romanoff had shaken her head. "*Fury would've known. Nothing gets past him.*"

Oh, if only she knew. Bucky sneaks another look to his left, at the man sitting next to him. A blind Enhanced, a government agent with a heart of gold and enough willpower to stop the planet still. Right under Fury's nose.

If they were in any other situation, Bucky would've laughed.

Never let it be said that Percy Jackson was a bad liar.

Chapter End Notes

tony, watching THE fruitiest thing he's ever seen: i do not see

hey fellas is it gay to think about how safe you feel in your bro's arms and how nice he smells

(and also how much you enjoy when he's happy and how pretty he looks in the sunlight and-)

its the soft "I swear it, with everything I have" for me

want to know shakira's favorite color of sharpie? follow me on insta @beansofdenim

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Midtown

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tuesday, August 14th

1:05 PM

The Hub, NY

It's burning hot out, and Mal holds a hand above her eyes to shield them from the sun. It's directly overhead, soaking everything in a glowing haze. The gravel underneath her feet is practically baking, crunching and groaning every time she shifts her weight.

Mal's just wearing a thin cotton tee, loose and billowing in the warm breeze, but it still feels like too much, sweat slick on the back of her neck, her hair flat on her head.

Jackson's call had been brief, tense, and filled her with a sense of dread.

Dan was still stuck at the hospital—luckily, it'd been a conference call with Lee, as well, who'd been getting work done at their friend's bedside for the past couple hours. Ever since Lee had put the building on lockdown a few days ago, ever since they'd all gotten that notification, a cold unease had settled in Mal's gut.

She'd picked the codename *Tremor*, what seemed like forever ago. It was fitting, she figured, especially now, with the constant shake in her hands whenever she got too lost in her own thoughts. She's not quite sure she'll ever be able to forget the way Dan looked, glasses shattered off to the side and laying in an ever-growing puddle of his own blood. The way Lee's face had been carefully blank as they bagged up the head, the reeling disgust and shock of their coworkers, of *their friends*, at the stench of it wafting down the hallway.

Days like this, Mal wondered what her life would have been like if she had never gotten that acceptance letter to the SHIELD academy.

Because, really, that's where it all started. She didn't know Jackson as well as Lee and Dan, but she knew enough. She knew that SHIELD changed him. That it kickstarted *something*, and it all ended up with SWORD being formed. A direct *fuck you*, an outright refutation of SHIELD and its deceit, its hidden bodies, its dark, dark secrets.

They didn't need a shield anymore; not one like that. Not a shield, tarnished and rusted with blood, that never actually protected them at all. A shield that was built by the very same people it was supposed to defend against.

SWORD was different. It was *good*. Mal wouldn't settle for any less.

She knew that things like *that*, like Dan's limp body and Lee's careful composure, were the price of having something good.

That didn't mean she had to like it, though.

She didn't have to like the fact that someone had gotten into their building, their safe haven, and left the bloody head of a good man, right on their conference table, where they all trickled in first thing in the morning, sleepy eyed and stretching out their stiff muscles. Where they said *good morning*, where they caught up with each other for a precious few minutes.

The Hub was a second home to Mal, and now there was just something rotten, something tainted, about it.

The SWORD members weren't safe anymore. The head was a message in multiple parts. Whoever did it not only knew how to get into the building, but probably knew them, as well.

There was no time to organize a security detail for Dan, still bed ridden and a sitting duck. Lee ended up agreeing to stay with it, despite how much Mal knew her friend wanted to be all together.

It just wasn't possible. There wasn't time to get people to keep Dan safe in his moment of vulnerability—even if they could find anyone they could trust, because *someone had to have betrayed them somehow*. No time to get Dan and all the medical equipment and the doctors to the SWORD facility, or somewhere else safe. No time to plan something out to bring Sergeant Barnes anywhere else than the Hub.

It was all they had.

So Mal stood out back in the blazing August heat, skin shining with sweat, knowing Aspen, Ross,

and Bridgette were all scrambling for some remnant of a plan to keep Barnes safe. Because Lee and Dan were across the city in a hospital room, and Jackson had to go take care of something *urgent* .

His voice dipped slightly on the word over the phone, so uncharacteristic it made Mal reel. She knew there were some things Jackson couldn't tell her; tell any of them, really. She didn't pry, because whoever had made his voice sound like that had to have been very, very important.

Dr. Stark's car that was worth more than her apartment pulled up onto the gravel eerily silent. It was one of those newer electric ones, lacking the roar of a typical car engine. The glare off the shiny coat of paint made her wince and avert her eyes.

She jogged up to the driver's side as Barnes got out of the car. Mal got one short look at Jackson, who looked so unbelievably stressed, before he spoke.

"Be careful, alright?"

Mal swallowed and nodded. "We all will."

Behind them, the Hub seemed out of place, cold concrete and metal doors against the sun-bleached surroundings. Mal's mind strayed, as it had become prone to doing, to that call with Lee.

"Are you sure it's safe? I mean, we had a security breach not even a week ago," Mal had argued in a low tone over the phone.

And it wasn't Jackson who replied, but Lee. *"There's nowhere else,"* He said, voice quiet. *"At least here, we'll have a chance."*

Lee was always quiet. He wasn't the talkative type; not like Dan's loud laugh or Ross's prodding jokes, Bridgette's smiley chatter or Aspen's dry wit.

Despite not typically saying more than a few sentences at once, Lee had presence. His stature, combined with the shockingly clear color of his eyes, the carefully cultivated flat expression. Lee, despite being so quiet, couldn't be anymore loud to Mal. Because Lee wasn't silent; when he did speak, his words were steady and clear.

Lee was quiet. Not his words.

But now, they were so soft, Mal barely heard them.

There's nowhere else, like Lee was just understanding it too.

It was a crushing realization. That there was just them, just the seven SWORD members, their leader having to go and two of their members not with them. That they really didn't have anyone they could trust. They'd been pushed into a corner, and were now desperately circling the wagons.

She looked at Jackson, who's face had always seemed so impassive. Mal looks at him, and for the first time, she thinks she truly sees him.

And then she turned to Barnes, and as she started ushering him into the building, she cast one look at the car, already driving away.

Oddly enough, that had felt like a goodbye.

Tuesday, August 14th

1:09 PM

Leaving the Hub, NY

Percy leaned his head back against the cool leather of the seat, letting out a weighted exhale.

Gods, it was amazing how fast everything could turn to shit.

Everything about the situation they were in made something uneasy twist in his gut. He wanted to call Tony to check in, but he didn't dare distract the man. Percy knew firsthand how fast a bounty could be snapped up. Peter didn't have long.

Tony was doing his part, and Percy needed to do his.

He closed his eyes, for once wishing he was dreaming. Maybe, if he was, he would have something they could use.

Percy would take anything, at this point. Anything beyond a feeling of heat and the smell of smoke, ashes on his face and a heartbeat he knew pounding in his ears. He knew whoever was there; if he heard it again, he had no doubt he could connect the dots. But his dreams were cruel, and he knew the next time he heard it, it would be because it was actually happening.

The worst part of the dreams was always the feelings that came with them.

The helplessness, the foreboding, the pure dread that consumed him as he woke up.

Something bad was going to happen.

And Percy wasn't sure he'd be able to stop it, this time.

Tuesday, August 14th

1:21 PM

Midtown School of Science and Technology, NY

Practice had been normal.

Abe was quizzing Charles from his spot on the floor—Peter had long since fixed the AC, eliminating the need to lean against the tiled ground to stay cool, but Abe still chose to lay there every practice, without fail.

Abe absently shuffled his papers, looking for something to try and stump Charles. The boy not on the floor was tapping his foot, a slightly distant look on his face as he waited. He was chewing

watermelon gum; Peter could smell it from where he was sitting. Sally and Cindy were working on their flashcards, the scratch of marker on paper coming from his left. They were sharing a pair of frayed earbuds, the upbeat pop music only audible to the two of them and Peter. Ned and Betty had started up their own *Kahoot* game, characterized by frantic clicking and the victorious laughs when the other one got something wrong. MJ was sitting directly next to Peter, smelling like coffee and book pages, shuffling through her own stack of flashcards to test Peter on.

Overtop all of this, the air condition whirred, the birds outside the window chirped, and something was *wrong*.

It felt like pins and needles in between his eyes, like someone was breathing down the back of his neck. He was tense as a wire, his eyes flitting around the empty cafeteria.

MJ looked at him, eyes flicking up over the stack of cards. She returned to the cards for a second, then backed up at him. She took him in, scanning over his face and taut shoulders, then put the cards down in a neat stack.

“What is it?”

Peter opened his mouth to tell her, but was shocked silent at the way his sixth sense seemed to scream at him, just about stealing the air right out of his lungs. His eyes widened further, and he abandoned all attempts at subtlety

, craning his head around. “I...don’t know.” He replied.

Her face morphed into a deep frown. “Something bad?”

Peter mutely nodding—that, at least, he was sure of.

She looked at him for another long moment before standing up. “Alright, everybody, pack up.” MJ announced.

When she just got a round of confused looks, she rolled her eyes. “We’re leaving. Pack your shit.”

With the promise of practice being cut early, everyone was suddenly clamoring to fit all their things in their bags. Ned was first, and instantly moved next to Peter. “What’s wrong?” He

whispered. Peter gave a minute shake of his head in lieu of response.

MJ, with a firm grip on Peter's arm, led the group towards the cafeteria doors. It's even quieter once they reach the hallway; the air conditioner a room away, all the sounds of studying silenced. Now, it's just footsteps and soft breathing.

They only make it past the first set of lockers when it happens.

Peter freezes mid-step, muscles locking. Suddenly, he feels like he's been submerged in the middle of the Arctic, sending him sinking into shock. Even he, with all his improved reflexes, doesn't have time to move. The wall to their left explodes in a mass of heat and fire, tearing through the plaster and metal, ripping it to shreds like it was made of tissue paper. In the blink of an eye, Peter is thrown against the lockers opposite, his head hitting the metal so hard his vision goes white.

When he comes to, he's laying on the floor, a sharp pain in between his eyes and coughing so hard his ribs ache. Everything hurts, actually, not just his ribs—his lungs burn, the back of his head stings, and there's a dull throb across his shoulders and back.

His ears are ringing, and when he reaches up, his hand comes away bloody. Peter lets out a disoriented groan, letting his hand drop.

Peter's spidey-sense is screaming at him, setting every nerve on end, but he can barely think straight. Everything's a dull haze, a blur of colors and heat.

A mass of footsteps echo in his ears, pounding in time with the throbbing pain in his head. He tries to roll over, to push himself up, but as soon as he moves, all the air is forced out of his lungs, and he lets out another cough.

He can see the others now. He was closest to the blast, thank the Gods, but the others were in no great shape either.

MJ was propped up against a locker, holding her sleeve to her head, quickly being stained red. Peter feels his heart lurch. Ned is laying on the floor, seemingly awake but most definitely dazed. Charles is leaning over Cindy, brushing her hair out of her face and trying to wake her. Sally and Betty are leaning against each other, Abe a few feet in front of them.

Peter remembers what Percy told him, closes his eyes and takes a few steady breaths despite his lungs protests. Counts seven heartbeats. Opens his eyes.

Relief crashes over him, temporarily dulling the pain.

He must've drifted away, because he blinks, and MJ has crawled over to him, a hand on the side of his head, the other poking his cheek. "Parker, you need to wake up," She says, slightly frantic.

Peter rolls his head to the side, eyes squinted. "Wh's h'appnin?" He slurs out, mouth feeling like it's full of cotton.

"The wall blew up," MJ said, her worried eyes betraying her flat tone.

Behind her, Cindy woke with a cough, ash falling between her lips. Charles let out a breath, his shoulders losing some of their tightness. MJ's strong hands help pull him into a sitting position, and the change in position is nauseating.

"Who else is here?" He asks, swiping the blood coating the side of his face with his hoodie sleeve.

Sally blinks, and takes a worrying amount of time to reply. "What do you mean?"

"Footsteps," Peter grunts. "Lot of 'em."

Charles frowns. "Peter, it's just us here."

MJ's face loses some of its color. "No, I don't think it is,"

The silence that falls on them after that is deafening.

Peter lets his eyes fall shut again, leaning against MJ for support. The ringing has gone down, and he's fairly sure he's not hearing things. There are definitely footsteps—heavy boots and low voices. They're far away; the opposite side of the school, easily.

“It’s them,” He gets out.

It takes a second, but MJ and Ned both understand what he means. Ned stands, only stumbling a little, and offers a hand to Sally so she can do the same. “We need to go,” He says frantically.

The situation seems to sink in, and Betty lets out a soft whimper. To her side, a pained cry comes from Abe. “My—my leg.” He whispers. Betty swears, leaning over to look at him. His ankle looks twisted, wrong in a way that makes Cindy wince and look away. They can’t see his knee, but Peter hears bones grinding and shifting in a way he knows they never should.

MJ swears loudly and viciously. “Can everyone else walk?”

Ned and Sally both nod. Betty shakily gets to her feet, but stays leaning against the wall. “Probably,” She offered weakly. Charles stumbles, but stands. When Cindy tries getting up as well, her knees buckle and Charles barely catches her.

MJ takes this in, then looks back at Peter. He wants to tell her he’ll be fine, but at the moment, he feels like even trying to talk might make him throw up. She takes his silence in, then nods decisively. “I’ll carry you if I have to, Parker.” She turns to the group. “Do you guys think we can lift Abe?”

This gets a round of uneasy but determined looks, and Betty, Sally, and Ned move towards him. As soon as Sally touches his leg to try and move him, he bites down on a scream. Sally flinches backwards like she’s been burned, and casts a panicked look at MJ.

MJ has that look on her face, one that Peter knows means she would be pacing if she wasn’t holding him up.

The ash *burns*, making every breath hurt. His ribs feel cracked if not broken, and everything is just so much that he feels his eyes burn. His spidey-sense is still flaring every second, kicking up his heart rate and making him feel like he wants to crawl out of his skin.

MJ takes one look at him, and, in a move he never saw coming, pulls him closer, his face buried in the crook of her neck. “You’ll be alright, Spider-Man,” She whispers to him. “We’ll be fine.”

With tremendous effort, he lifts an arm to wrap around her shoulders. The scent of char and blood fades away, replaced by fabric softener and coconut shampoo. Peter exhales softly. “They’re getting closer,” He whispers.

Her arms tighten around him as if she knows what he’s about to say.

“Take Abe, get out of here. It’ll take all of you to carry him without moving his leg too much.”

She pinches his side. “If you think we’re going to leave you, you’re stupider than I thought.”

Peter can’t even muster up the energy to react to that last part. “Please, Em. I just need a few minutes, wait for the healing to kick in a little. You guys can be off the property by then.”

“If it’s going to take so little time, then we can wait it out,” She refutes.

They can all hear the boots echoing down the hallway, now. Peter estimates at least a dozen, and he can faintly smell gunpowder and metal through the thick layer of ash and smoke. Charles wipes furiously at his eyes, and Sally squeezes her eyes shut.

It’s an entire squad, wearing tactical gear complete with masks to filter the air. Each one takes in the group of teens impassively. Peter stares up at them from the floor, his heart in his throat.

The Hydra symbol stares back, emblazoned on each of the armored chests.

Peter pushes MJ away as gently as he can, using the wall to his back to haul himself up, to put himself in between the agents and his friends. He only makes it halfway up before his knees buckle, and he barely catches himself.

One of the men laughs.

“Sorry, kids.” One from the front says, a smile evident in her voice. “Not your day.” She unholsters her gun, makes a show of flipping off the safety.

Slowly, Peter looks up at her. “I wouldn’t do that, if I were you.”

He receives a scoff. “That’s cute. If you go silently, we’ll make it quick.”

Peter does his best to meet the eyes behind the tinted goggles. “No you won’t.”

“Don’t trust my word?” She replies, voice light as if she’s not holding a gun above a group of injured children, as if she hadn’t just stormed a *high school*.

“Oh, not at all,” Peter says, trying to match her easy tone. “But I meant you aren’t going to kill us.”

That gets a few raised eyebrows, and he does his best to remain impassive.

“Cocky little shit,” A man from the back mutters.

“And why,” The woman grits out, “Is that?”

Now, it’s Peter’s turn to smile. It’s probably not very impressive; holding onto a wall for dear life, disoriented and bloody, a split lip and ash-coated skin—he does it anyway. Instead of a verbal response, he juts his chin out, nodding behind the group.

“I’d like you to meet my friend.”

A distinctly New York voice, low and slightly raspy, comes from behind the Hydra squad. “A pleasure to meet you.” Percy says.

At once, they all spin around, just in time for Percy’s fist to connect with the man in the back’s face, knocking him out cold. The Hydra agent hit the ground with a thud.

Percy grinned. “Hey, kids.”

Peter let out a hoarse laugh. “Hi, Percy. Good timing.”

Immediately, the other eleven guns were aimed at Percy, whose hands were shoved in his pockets. He wasn’t dressed for a fight; in black pants and a dark green sweater, but Peter knew better than to assume he wasn’t somehow packing a small arsenal.

“Hands up!” The woman from earlier ordered, clearly having had enough of their casual talk.

Percy sighed, then linked his hands together and stretched them out, cracking his knuckles. “You guys alright?” He asked, rolling up the sleeves of his sweater. He was wearing thick braces around his wrists, Peter noted—the ones he typically wore with his suit. They connected to gloves, dark material with plating on the knuckles.

It was MJ who answered. “Relatively,”

He nodded, then turned back to the Hydra squad just in time for the woman to fire directly at his torso. Peter’s spider-sense went off so hard he flinched. What happened next was probably one of the most incredible displays of violence Peter had ever seen.

Percy ducked, hitting the ground and coming up into a roll. He swept his leg, knocking two of the agents off their feet at once. He came up swinging, barreling into an agent who was fumbling for their gun. The agent slammed into the lockers hard enough to leave a dent where their head was, and they slumped to the ground with a groan.

He turned just in time to duck under a wide punch, and he landed one of his own right in the agent’s diaphragm. Percy spun, delivering a textbook-perfect roundhouse kick directly to the agent’s face. They too hit the floor, out cold. One came at him, gun raised. Percy grabbed their wrist, wrenching their arm to the side just as they shot, bullets going over his shoulder and instead sinking into their comrade on the other side of the hall. Percy, his grip still tight on their wrist, yanked forward with his superior strength, introducing the agent’s face to his knee.

The other Hydra members seemed to have finally gathered that taking him on one by one was *not* a good idea, and moved together. The biggest one, easily half a foot taller than Percy and much, *much* bigger, grabbed him from behind, wrapped an arm around his neck. Another grabbed his arm, trying to put a cuff around his wrist. A third came to the other side, trying to do the same on the other arm.

Percy reared up, leaning back on the man holding him, using him as a support to land a kick to the knee of the agent trying to cuff him on the left. Then, while the big man was still off balance, clearly having expected someone Percy's size to not be that strong, Percy slammed his head backwards, eliciting a solid crunch from his nose.

Percy bent his knees, grabbed the big man by the arm still around his neck, and tossed him effortlessly over his shoulder, right into the woman trying to cuff his right arm.

In barely a minute, he'd taken out eight armed Hydra agents, and next to him, Ned whispered, "*Holy balls,*"

Another came at him, not with a gun but with a baton, crackling with electricity. The man swung wide, aiming for Percy's neck. The demigod ducked, grabbed the man's elbow, and used him as leverage to leap up and wrap his thighs around his neck, twisting and throwing him to the floor. Once the man was down, Percy slammed his knuckles into his face once, twice, thrice, until he stopped trying to get up.

Another woman ran at him from behind, jabbing her stun baton into his back. Slowly, as the sound of burning fabric met their ears, Percy turned around to face her. The expression on his face alone made Peter blanch.

"My mom gave me this sweater," He grit out. Then, he grabbed the hand holding the stun baton, knelt the woman in the gut, and wrenched her arm backwards until something popped. She howled, and Percy pried the baton out of her grip. He jammed it into the side of her neck with a snarl eerily reminiscent of Mrs. O'Leary.

The only two left standing rushed him, grabbing him around the middle and slamming him into the wall. The air left Percy's lungs, and he groaned. The agent grabbed him by the hair, clearly intent on slamming his face into the wall as he spun them around. He got one lucky hit in before Percy shook off the disorientation, and whipped his head around to sink his teeth into the man's exposed wrist.

The hydra agent howled, immediately releasing Percy's hair in favor of trying to shake him off. Percy released him, only to immediately kick him in the gut so hard he stumbled back and fell to the ground. Percy stood over him, flashing a bloody grin. The man let out a slight whimper. Percy grabbed him by the head, a hand on each side, and bashed his head into the tile until he was out cold.

The last agent remaining, the woman who had been threatening the group, stood frozen. She lunged forward, towards them, getting a hold on Abe's collar and jamming the barrel of the gun against his head.

“Not one more step,” She hissed.

Percy paused, turning to face her. His hair was mussed, blood smeared across his nose and mouth. He regarded the woman for a second, eyes narrowed and calculating. Then, his head slowly tilted to the side, and he smiled. “Are you really going to shoot that boy?”

The temperature in the room dropped a few degrees, and Peter could have sworn he heard waves crashing against the banks, despite the fact that the Hudson was blocks away. In the lighting, Percy’s bloody teeth glinted and Peter repressed a shiver.

He forgot, sometimes, that while Percy was the guy that played checkers with his dog and made cookies while wearing *Nemo* pajamas, he was also Deathstroke, Sentinel, and a demigod with godly power running through his veins.

The woman’s heartbeat picked up, but she didn’t move. “If you don’t get on the ground.” She said. “Hands on your head.”

And Percy laughed.

Then he moved—*fast*, Peter barely even caught it. He stuck an arm out, then tugged on something invisible, like pulling a thick rope towards himself with one hand.

In under a second, a flood of water rushed in through the cracks in the wall and ceiling, engulfing her. Like it had a mind of its own, it tightened around her throat and pried the gun from her fingers, where it fell harmlessly to the floor. Percy flicked a single finger upwards, and she was tossed into the roof like a ragdoll.

Percy wiped his nose with the side of his hand, smearing blood across his lip. He exhaled heavily, then turned to Peter.

“Now, can someone tell me why the hell you guys are in school in the middle of August?”

PERCY MEETS ACDEC PERCY MEETS ACDEC

i tried so hard to write that fight scene you guys BETTER appreciate it, i loaded it up with as much big dick energy as i could

percy's so fucking feral. that's why he wins fights. he's just batshit insane.

percy, standing above them, face covered in blood after taking out a dozen armed hydra agents while wearing a cute lil sweater: :}

acdec team: oh boy i sure hope this doesnt awaken anything in me

enjoying the angst? i sure hope so, cause youre about to get SO MUCH MORE

reminder that character playlists are on my spotify, and character art and Other Funny Stuff is on @beansofdenim on insta

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Secondary

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter 34

Tuesday, August 14th

1:56 PM

Midtown School of Science and Technology, NY

Peter was pretty sure Betty was drooling.

It was dead silent, the members of his decathlon team staring at Percy with slack jaws and wide eyes. Sally and Ned are standing, her grip on his arm tight. Betty is frozen in her spot leaning over Abe, and Charles is still holding onto Cindy, who's swaying slightly. Peter is still on the ground, MJ's arms around him.

It's still uncomfortably warm, smelling like sweat and a little bit of blood. Most of the ash has settled down, but it kicks up like a flurry of snow when someone moves too much.

MJ recovers first. "AcDec." She gets out.

Percy snaps. "Right." Then, he comes towards them and drops to his knees in front of Peter. He carefully takes his head in his hands, running a hand over the back of his head. "You've got a pretty bad bump there, kid." Percy notes, brow furrowed.

Peter gives him a weak grin. "It'll heal."

The demigod's lips are pursed tightly. "I suppose it will," He gives.

Then, he moves to the rest of the team. Sally and Ned give verbal confirmations of their status—they were the furthest away, and escaped with a few scratches and bruises. Betty's ribs are definitely bruised, but probably not broken. The entire time, every one of them stares up at Percy, eyes wide and mouths agape.

When he gets to Cindy, Percy's frown deepens. "What's your name?" He asks gently.

It takes her a moment to respond. "Cindy."

"Nice to meet you, Cindy. I'm Percy, Percy Jackson. Can you answer a few questions for me?"

Again, she responds a beat late with an agreeing hum.

"Are you feeling dizzy?"

"A little. My head hurts."

"How's your vision?"

Cindy squints. "Fuzzy," She admits.

Percy's breath whistles through his teeth. "She's definitely concussed." He turns to Peter. "Kid, can I borrow your flannel?"

Peter strips it off without question and hands it over. Percy wipes some of the grime off, then folds it. He waves his hand, and water snakes over to his hand, forming a blob that quickly solidifies into a solid piece of ice. Percy wraps it in the flannel, then hands it to Charles. "Keep this on her head. If she starts acting worse, tell me."

Charles nods, eyes wide, as he gently presses the impromptu ice pack to Cindy's head.

Lastly, Percy turns to Abe. And, by the look on his face, things aren't good. Betty's eyes don't leave Percy as he studies Abe's leg.

"This...this is a bad break, kid. They jammed phones; there's no way to call for EMS in the building. And either way, we don't have time to wait around."

Abe chokes off a sob, and Percy's hand comes to rest on his shoulder. "Hey, hey. You'll be alright. Promise. I'm," Percy takes in a breath. "I'm going to fix your leg, alright? But it's gonna hurt. *Bad.*"

Abe bit down on his lip so hard it drew blood. He inhaled shakily, then nodded. "Do it," He whispered. Betty grabs ahold of his hand, and he grips her tight.

Percy, as gently as he can, places his hands atop Abe's leg. The slight jostle makes Abe cry out, and Percy flinches. "Sorry," He whispers. "On three, okay? Relax for me. It'll hurt less."

He receives a nod.

"One," Percy says, before his shoulders go tense and a loud *crack* comes from Abe's ankle and knee. Abe howls, his eyes clenching shut. As soon as he's done, Percy moves back, and Sally and Ned take his place, leaning over Abe and offering what comfort they can.

Peter watches, eyes wide. Percy never really used his visible abilities much—besides Ontario, which was something completely... *else*, this was the first time Peter had seen him use them in a fight. It came to him how little he actually knew about Percy's demigod life; Peter had no clue Percy could even *do* whatever he did to Abe's leg.

Beside him, MJ swallowed. "What happened to two and three?" She asked shakily.

Percy gave a small shrug. "He was going to tense up." Was all he said.

MJ eyed him for a second longer before joining the group surrounding Abe, giving Peter's hand a quick squeeze before she did so. Her grip was warm and strong, and settled something in him he didn't know had shaken loose. Peter, who was feeling much better already, stood to join her. Before he did, though, he noticed Percy out of the corner of his eye.

After a second of hesitation, he went to stand next to Percy. "Are you alright?" He asked.

Percy let out a humorless laugh. "Everything's kinda gone to shit, kid." He said. "It'd be concerning if I was."

Fair. Peter nodded. Then, he asked, “How did you do that?”

He didn’t have to clarify which part. Percy, for a second, got this distant look in his eyes that immediately sent a wrong feeling down Peter’s spine. The demigod exhaled heavily, his shoulders slumping.

“Bones are made of one third water,” He muttered by way of explanation.

Peter’s eyes widened. Percy’s hydrokinesis was a fascinating idea, and Peter had spent a long time theorizing about its limitations. Not once had he considered Percy could move something that had a high water content instead of just water molecules. He opened his mouth, a million questions on the tip of his tongue, when he looked at Percy again.

His shoulders were tense, arms drawn in. Peter’s words died instantly. “You don’t like doing that, do you?”

Percy wiped at his nose. “No,” He said softly. “I really don’t.” Then, so incredibly soft that Peter barely heard it, he added, “It’s better than blood, though.”

Oh, God. Horror washed over him. Peter could only stare, feeling like something heavy had dropped in his gut. Shit, what did he even *say* to that?

On the floor a few feet away, something buzzed. Percy’s brow knitted and he walked towards one of the fallen Hydra agents, grabbing a small radio from their belt.

“—do you copy? Is the mission complete?”

Nobody moved.

“Delta squad? Do you copy?”

Silence.

"If you do not respond, we will be sending in the secondary team." The voice on the other end warned.

Percy wordlessly crushed the radio into a twisted chunk of metal in his fist.

He turns back to the loosely assembled group of kids, and runs a slightly bloody hand through his hair. "Alright, kiddos, time to get moving."

Everyone stood, even Cindy, though she was still leaning on Charles. Abe, with some help, got to his feet. He put some weight on his leg hesitantly, and his eyes widened. "How did you..." He trailed off, eyes wide.

For the first time, Percy smiled, dimples flashing, and winked. Betty's cheeks turned bright red, and Charles swallowed thickly.

"Okay," Peter said loudly, "Time to go."

Percy visibly bit the inside of his cheek to hide another smile. "Right," He agreed.

He stuck close to the demigod, sixth sense still sending waves of unease down his spine. They definitely weren't out of the woods yet. Percy, as always, seemed to know what he was thinking, and gave him a little nudge with his elbow. "I've pulled myself out of worse. So have you," He reminded quietly.

Peter nodded uncertainty. The words did instill a sense of comfort, but only so much. *Secondary team*. The radio's transmission played in his head on repeat, the static filling in between his eyes and the cold, cold, tone of the speaker settling on the back of his neck.

"Hey, where's Lea?" He suddenly asked, realizing that she was missing from her usual place at Percy's side.

"My mom invited your aunt over. She's guarding them all."

For a second, Peter was about to ask what exactly Mrs. O’Leary could do about an armed Hydra squad, but then he remembered...well, everything about Percy and the things he was involved in.

Lea could probably hold her own and then some.

Tuesday, August 14th

1:51 PM

New York Presbyterian Queens Hospital

Dan wasn’t quite sure who was doing worse; him, or Lee.

Sure, he was a jittery mess—drumming his fingers, chewing the inside of his cheek, shifting his weight in his hospital bed. Dan’s nervousness was a loud, upfront one.

Lee’s, as it usually was when it came to the two of them, was the opposite. Lee was sitting like she was carved from marble, barely even blinking. The grip on her phone was white-knuckle tight, and her eyes hadn’t left the door in half an hour.

He knew it was killing her, just like it was him, that they couldn’t be at the Hub with the rest of their team. The only scrap of news they’d gotten so far was a quick text from Bridgette that Mal had gone out back to see Barnes inside.

Dan didn’t have anything against Barnes—not in the slightest. He was just concerned. Understandably so, he liked to think. Though it wasn’t his fault, trouble followed Barnes. Trouble that would one day catch up to the rest of them.

And, he thought, giving Lee’s tense form a glance, that day might just be today.

“Do you think they’re gonna be alright?” He ventured aloud.

Lee finally abandoned her staring contest with the door to look at him. She'd come dressed casually for the day; or, as casual as she ever got. A short sleeve button up, a thick cardigan with elbow patches, pants and a beat up pair of hiking boots. It was an odd combination, but very *her*.

Despite how much he ragged on her for dressing vaguely like an old history professor, he stole those sweaters whenever he got the opportunity. He wasn't quite sure where she got them, and, to this day, she refused to tell him.

Lee pursed her lips. "I hope so," She settled on.

Another thing about Lee; she was blunt. She was never the type to lie to try and make somebody feel better, to dance around an issue. When they first met, he'd thought it was a tad rude. Now, though, he just appreciated it.

"I'm worried," He admitted, scrunching his face to shove his glasses up his nose. Bridgette had dropped by with them, looking like they'd never gotten crushed in the first place.

Lee inhaled quietly. "Me too," She breathed out.

They relapse into silence.

Dan leans his head back, air puffing out of his cheeks. He stares longingly at the window, which lets a few precious rays of sunlight into the room through the curtains. Dan's never really been a fan of the heat; and any other day he'd gladly be inside rather than out. Now, though, he regrets all the missed hours he could've spent outside.

He's been in this stupid hospital for over a week, in the same room, in the same bed. The four walls around him have seemed to inch closer every time he opens his eyes, steadily growing closer as he sits in his bed.

It was blisteringly hot and disgustingly humid outside. He knows he'd be red as a lobster in less than an hour, but that doesn't really stop him from his wistful thoughts.

Maybe when this was all over, and Lee wasn't sitting in between him and the door with a gun in her bag, watching, *waiting*, he'd badger someone into taking him to the small courtyard out back. When there wasn't this persistent feeling of dream pooling in his stomach. When he and his friends

could stop looking over their shoulder and staring for just a bit too long at any of their other coworkers.

Lee checks her watch—an old thing of stainless steel and leather—and her lips twitch downwards.

Dan returns his gaze towards the window.

“How the fuck did we get *here* ?” He says aloud.

She blinks, and turns towards him, one eyebrow raised in the usual mildly questioning and ever so slightly judging manner that he’s learned to not take to heart.

He waves a loose hand around, and is pleasantly surprised by the smoothness of the motion. “Did you think this was what SHIELD Academy was going to get us?” He elaborates. Lee’s face changes, softening ever so slightly.

“No,” She admits. “Not really.”

Dan sighs. “Cause this? Kinda sucks.”

Lee almost smiles. “That’s one way to put it.”

He, on the other hand, does grin. “I mean, God, this is ridiculous! I just wanted to work in cybersecurity! You were a field medic!” He knows his voice is edging on hysterical, but he can’t bring himself to care. “Lee, you’ve seen me date, so you understand how grand a statement this is; I’ve never felt so out of my depth before.”

A long second passes, and then, “You dating was one of the worst things I’ve ever watched.”

They stare at each other, and then both burst out laughing.

“You remember Tammy Taylor?” He asks between giggles. Lee shakes her head. “The tuba player? God, how could I *not*?”

He'd dated Tammy Taylor for a whopping two months, when he and Lee were still at the Academy together. She was pretty in a cheerful, light way, with a bright smile and an exuberant voice.

Lee, right off the bat, was not much of a fan.

Don't get him wrong; she was absolutely supportive, and vacated their shared dorm with a roll of her eyes whenever he asked, the tips of his ears red. Her only comment, negative or otherwise, about Tammy Taylor was, "She's loud."

They'd ended up splitting when she decided she'd wanted to join a mariachi band and wanted him to move down to the southern border with her.

Looking back, it seems like a lifetime ago.

He'd been just shy of twenty, hair still cropped short the way his grandmother had always liked it. Dan had enrolled in the SHIELD Academy on a whim, and nearly fell over when the acceptance letter had come a few weeks later.

They stayed in a small barrack-type space, four to a room, for the first year. After that, once you chose your specialty, they were placed in apartment-like dorms for two. Dan and Lee, after some creative persuasion with the housing director, got one together.

They'd been tentative friends up until then; but they knew, at least, they could stand each other enough to be roommates. He'd been a little unsure of what to make of Lee; she was tall, quiet, and had the most piercing eyes Dan had ever seen.

She spoke with a soft accent that muddled her *w's* and rounded her *oo's*, had a terrarium that she took meticulous care of, and had once grudgingly admitted that she had a team of sled dogs growing up, and suddenly, she wasn't so much of an unknown.

They'd grown together; as Lee started learning to suture wounds with dental floss if it came down to it, how to cut open a cadaver, as Dan was seated in front of a computer and his instructor started a timer, as he saw things in corners of people's emails and hard drives that he still couldn't shake off.

Dan grew into his shoulders and hands, and Lee continued shooting up like a weed until well after graduation. They joined SHIELD together with bright eyes and smiles, and fled it coated in the blood of people who they thought they could trust.

They were both harsher, now. Lee had always been rather stony and seemingly indifferent, but after SHIELD, after they had to split up, she was just the smallest bit more guarded in a way Dan doubted many noticed. He was the same; checking over his shoulder far too often and looking a bit too deep into anyone before he even thought about considering them a friend.

But sometimes, Dan looked at her and saw that nineteen-year-old who'd silently handed him a pen in the middle of a lecture, with the feathery blonde hair that fell past her jaw and continuously pushed her glasses up with the tip of her finger.

(When they had gone into hiding after the file dump with Jackson's help, he'd grown his hair out and adorned a pair of lens-less glasses. He hadn't realized until months later, when he caught his reflection in a store window, that his hair looked just like he remembered Lee's. It had hurt so bad but had made him laugh at the same time.

When they finally saw each other for the first time in what felt like an eternity, her hair was cropped short and her wire-rimmed frames were gone.

They'd stared at each other for a long while.

Dan, with shaggy hair that curled downwards to his collar, because of the combination of the paranoia and the deep need for a change, because he could barely bring himself to look back at his reflection without the kid who posed for his SHIELD identification photo with a wide grin staring back.

Lee, who'd taken a pair of scissors to her own locks, who'd gotten contacts, because the people they thought they could trust had grabbed her by the hair and held a knife to her throat, had hit her in the face and shattered her lenses, and left her with a small scar on the inside of the bridge of her nose.

They'd stared at each other, who'd been subconsciously mirroring one another and reaching out, and laughed.)

Their laughter filtered off, and Lee shook her head. “Dan, I care deeply about you, but if I never meet another of your girlfriends, I think I’ll live a happier life.”

He gasped. “Oh, but who is going to give them threatening shovel talks to protect my virtue?”

Lee raised a slow eyebrow. “Virtue?”

Dan held his serious face for another second before cracking up again. “I’ll have you know—”

He’s cut off by a loud ping coming from Lee’s bag. Slowly, they both freeze, tension laying over them like a thick blanket. Lee pulls out her phone, stares at it. Reads the message once, then twice more. The color drains from her skin.

“Dan,” Her voice is soft. Not in the usual, toned down way, but like she’s almost afraid to speak. “Dan, I just got an alert that the lockdown was overridden.”

His heart drops.

There’s only two people that can override the lockdown Mal placed the building under once Barnes got inside. Two people. Jackson is the first, and he’s still somewhere across the city. As for the second person—well, Dan is looking at her.

Slowly, his hand comes up to cover his mouth. “Oh, God.” He whispers.

Lee’s face is drawn, and she nods gravely. “Someone’s in the building.”

Chapter End Notes

is cindy dazed because of the consussion, or the fact that percy is literally two feet away from her? yes. the answer is yes.

also shout out to me for not knowing anything about setting broken bones or head injuries

dan and lee backstory is something that can be so personal--

lee: someone's in the building

dan:

dan: man we cant have SHIT

find me on insta @beansofdenim if you want to live

we've gotten past gay pride month, gay wrath month, and now it is time for: gay sloth month. prepare.

you know, sometimes i wonder if this fic has reached my target audience or not. but then i get comments from people with users like Genderless_rat, and i think 'oh, these are exactly the type of people who i want to be reading this'
shout out to you, Genderless_rat

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Collapse

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tuesday, August 14th

2:03 PM

The Hub, NY

Sergeant Barnes was interesting.

Aspen sat, perched on their desk, knees drawn up to their chest for a place to rest their chin. Mal had brought the man in over an hour ago, squinty-eyed from the cloudless summer heat. They'd all offered their greetings, and Aspen watched as his eyes had flickered over all of them.

Narrow-shouldered Bridgette, her toffee colored hair pulled back into a braid, hovering near the doorway. Ross, his feet up on his desk, dark hair ruffled from running his hands through it again and again. Another look at Mal, who was smoothing out her shirt and eyeing the clock. Then, his eyes flitted over to Aspen, who met his gaze.

The longer they looked, the more they understood. Dark circles were set under Barnes's eyes, and his shoulders were ever so slightly slumped. He looked tired, and oddly resigned. Like he, too, had known they wouldn't get out of this completely unscathed.

There was still an obvious strength to him, though. Aspen could read that, loud and clear. His even, soundless steps, the width of his shoulders and forearms, steady hands and gait. His metal arm, peeking out through his long sleeves, shined under the clinical white lights of the bullpen.

His eyes were blue, like ice. Resting somewhere between Aspen's own cobalt and Lee's desaturated powder shades. There was a weight to them, the pressing memories of a century heavy on him.

Aspen stared, unabashed, for a minute longer. Then, like nothing had happened, they turned away, back to their desk.

Mal directed him to Lee's empty desk—it was either hers or Dan's, and that was an obvious

choice. Dan's was littered with loose papers, sticky notes, and pens in all shapes and sizes. His computer was on one side, and the other a pyramid of soda cans he and Ross had built before the Council hearing that nobody had the heart to take down. Lee's, by contrast, was practically empty. A neat stack of folders and a book held up by a simple square bookend, a cup with five of the exact same mechanical pencil and two matching ballpoint pens, and a small fern. Everything was neat and tidy, not a hair out of place.

Eventually, Bridgette drifted into the room, quietly taking her own place. They all tried to get some sort of work done, but Aspen knew none of them would be able to accomplish much. Ross was staring at the Coke can stack like it would tell him something, Bridgette was all spacey when she was nervous, and Mal was too busy eyeing Barnes, the clock, and Jackson's GPS tracker.

They all had trackers on their phone, just in case a mission ever went south and they needed to find each other. When Mal had gotten off the phone with Jackson and Lee, before Barnes had been dropped off, she'd relayed to them that they all needed to get rid of them.

Just in case, Jackson had said. He didn't have to finish the rest of the sentence to know just what he was worried about. He'd been the only one to keep his—saying, quote, "I'm the only one who's actually supposed to be moving."

Aspen knew it was mostly for their peace of mind, which was nice of him. At first, they were a little worried about him keeping it on—if it was such a big concern that the trackers would lead to trouble, was it really worth it?

Then Aspen remembered everything they had heard about the whole *Crossbones* situation, how they were pretty sure Jackson had straight up killed the elite Hydra agent in less than five minutes, and then they figured the whole thing was for SWORD's safety and not Jackson's. The man was dangerous; in an unpredictable, wild card sort of way that Aspen could respect.

They cast another look to Barnes, who'd leaned back in Lee's chair, and was staring up at the ceiling.

Aspen, as a rule, always tried to keep personal feelings out of work. It made things messy. Complicated. But it was hard to not feel for Barnes. Life had most certainly not been kind to him—not that it was to anybody, but him especially. They turned back to their desk, trying to type as silently as possible as to not break the delicate silence that inhabited the building. Nobody dared speak—it was just the scratch of pens and the tapping of keyboards, soft breathing and Ross jogging his leg.

The front doors of their building, despite being less than a year old, always made noise. They creaked, loud enough to echo down the halls and into the conference rooms and bullpen. It wasn't really a problem for them; with only the seven of them, there wasn't much coming and going. Besides, Aspen liked being able to do a mental count of who was there and who wasn't.

Bridgette and Lee were always there before them, along with Commander Jackson when he wasn't out on assignment. Aspen knew the others like clockwork. Every morning, the door creaked once at half-past eight when Mal came in, then a bit later when Dan showed up. Ross came in fifteen minutes after, and the familiar sound wouldn't happen once more until everyone went to lunch.

Aspen liked routine. It was grounding. Recently, all of that had been thrown out the window, and it was stressing them out a little, to be honest. They were almost relieved when the front door creaked. Dan always took a late lunch—that would be him, coming in only a minute or so late than his average.

They hummed a little to themselves, a little pleased that things were settling down. Dan had probably just gone to that one diner he liked with the line that was just a little longer than the sandwich shop he frequented—

Aspen's pen clattered out of their fingers.

Dan had been in the hospital for over a week. He's not gone out to lunch. Lee is with Dan. Mal, Ross, and Bridgette are behind them. Jackson is still across the damn city.

They'd forgotten. How could they have forgotten?

Roughly pushing away from the desk, Aspen stands up, gut lurching. "Guys—" They start, before being cut off by the sound of heavy boots. They only have a split second, where everybody just slowly turns to look at one another. Behind them, Barnes closes his eyes like the inevitable has come.

The doors to the bullpen open with a bang, and a dozen military grade rifles are suddenly leveled straight at them. "*Hands up!*"

Ross and Mal immediately go for their holsters, but before they can even touch their service weapons, something long and shiny is embedded into their necks. There's a dark red plume at the end, and it takes Aspen a second to place it as a tranquilizer dart. The effect is immediate, the two

of them both pitching forward to catch themselves on their desks almost in sync.

Aspen squeezes their eyes tight, and slowly stands, putting their hands high above their head. They turn their head behind them, just in time to make eye contact with Barnes. His eyes are full of sorrow, expressive in a way that makes Aspen's chest hurt. Slowly, they just shake their head, and he lowers his.

A sharp pain in the side of their neck, and then the world tilts on its axis, and Aspen is on the floor.

Tuesday, August 14th

2:03 PM

Midtown School of Science and Technology, NY

They make it across the hallway, down the stairs, and past the gym when Percy holds his arm out in front of them, stopping everybody in their tracks. Peter gives him a wide-eyed look, and Percy just taps his ears in response.

Peter tilts his head, trying to focus on the sounds past them. It's not a team, this time, but one set of feet, leisurely walking across the tiles past the front office. Peter's hearing is better than Percy's, he's fairly sure—all his senses are probably better, except for Percy's bloodhound-like nose. It's Percy's strange sixth sense that most likely alerted him.

Sometimes, Peter really wishes his own sixth sense was that helpful. Percy was a walking radar in a way Peter still didn't quite understand, and all he got was weaponized anxiety. He resolved to ask Percy about it, after all this. If there was an after.

“—kid, come on out!”

The voice was distant, echoing off the empty hallways. Peter immediately stiffened, his spidey-sense shooting up and down his spine once more. His hand shot up to grab at Percy's sleeve. Involuntarily, his breathing sped up. “That's—”

“Toomes.” Percy finished, voice carefully composed. He wasn’t wearing sunglasses like he usually was when he went out, allowing Peter to see an emotion he couldn’t quite identify flash in his eyes.

“Oh, Pedro!”

“How...how is he here?” Peter asked desperately. Behind him, he knew his friends were giving him bewildered, but mostly concerned, looks. “Somebody blew a hole in the Raft.” Percy said tightly.

“I know you’re in here!”

Toomes was just around the corner. Percy gave Peter a strained smile. “Don’t worry about it, alright? Just...make sure he can’t see you, alright?” Peter looked at him for a long second before complying. He backed up a few paces, and sidestepped into a nearby classroom, hovering just behind the door frame. His friends followed his lead, crowding in behind him. Out in the hallway, Percy shoved his hands in his pockets, adopting a casual stance.

He could tell Toomes caught sight of Percy based on the momentary blip in the man’s heartbeat, the surprise fading fast. “Well, hello.” Toomes said, and Peter could picture his off-kilter grin perfectly. He squeezed his eyes shut.

“I suggest you leave.” Percy’s voice was flat, business-like.

That brought a small chuckle out of the other man. “Sorry, kid. I’ve got business here. Now,” His voice grew louder, making Peter wince. *“Where is Peter Parker?”*

Silence. Sally and Abe both cast him panicked looks, and MJ gripped his upper arm tightly. Peter just shook his head at the other AcDec members, silently begging them to stay quiet.

“Sorry, fresh out. Just me, today. The name’s Percy Jackson, by the way.”

“Tell me where he is.” Toomes’s focus returned to Percy.

“Stop picking on the fifteen year old.” Percy shot back calmly. “You don’t seem to like messing with people your own size, don’t you? Think beating him down’s gonna make you a big man?” Peter could hear Toomes gritting his teeth. Percy continued on, “Well, let me tell you something. I’ve met a lot of big men, and they always end up smaller than you think.”

“Last chance. This is between me and him.” Toomes hissed.

“Gods,” Percy remarked. “You really want to beat the shit out of a kid your daughter’s age, huh?” Then, “Oh, did I strike a nerve? Yeah, I know about Liz. You haven’t seen her in, what, a year? Two? I’m not surprised.” The shark-like grin was evident in his voice. “If they haven’t already, I bet they’re going to change their last name. Do you think they’ve thrown out all the photos with you in them? Burned them, maybe.” Percy mused.

“*Liz?*” Cindy mouthed, her eyes widening as the realization dawned on her. She barely suppressed a gasp, hands flying to her mouth as she looked at Peter.

“You know *nothing* about my family.” Toomes snarled, tone drenched in white-hot rage. “I did this for them. Everything, for them.”

Percy tossed his head back and laughed. Good and long, letting it reverberate down the halls. When he was done, his voice was alarmingly devoid of emotion. “You’re a sad excuse for a man. I can only assume you’re an even worse father.”

Peter sucked in a sharp breath. Percy was antagonizing him, on purpose. Why? He remembers Toomes’s anger, could still feel the sharp sting of his metal wings tearing through his flesh, the blistering burns from the fires, the crushing weight of the building. How it felt balanced on his shoulders, pressing down on him until he felt like his ribs were going to crumble and his lungs would burst from all the pressure. Peter thought he was going to die there, alone, wearing a homemade suit and without anybody knowing where he was—

He swallowed.

“Peter!” Toomes roared. “I know you can hear me! I see you’ve made a friend. Well, it just so happens, that I have too! Why don’t you come out and meet him?” His playful tone was gone, replaced by a vicious scream. “No? Alright! Well, I guess I can deal with you myself in the meantime.” Toomes said, voice full of sadistic gratification, “I’m sure you remember this move.”

It took a second to register what he'd said, and when Peter realized, it hit him like a freight train, shoving the air out of his lungs. "No," He whispered, lunging forward. His spidey-sense it up like a block of C-4, so blinding he saw stars.

Just like he remembered, the wings whirred to life alarmingly fast.

I'm sorry, Peter, Toomes had said as he held the remote. Peter didn't think he was sorry this time.

It occurred to Peter that they were now standing right under where the bomb went off upstairs. That couldn't have been a coincidence. The exo-suit, made of stolen Chitauri technology, was faster than Peter would ever hope to be. He couldn't even move, paralyzed in his own fear. He'd gotten lucky with the warehouse. Peter couldn't lift the school off their shoulders.

He was going to die here. So would MJ and Ned. Cindy, Sally, Betty, Abe, Charles. Percy. Well, maybe Percy could survive the building. Peter didn't know much about demigods. Maybe Percy would be able to walk out of there. He'd have to call May and Mr. Stark and tell them what happened. How Peter was so *scared* he didn't even show himself to Toomes. Like a coward.

The wings crashed into the walls, gouging deep lines that went straight through the lockers. The entire building shuddered. Then the other wall. Once, twice, and Peter clapped his hands over his ears, his heart thumping in his ribs like a wounded bird trying to escape a cage. He had time to just lock eyes with MJ, her eyes wide and shining with tears like he knew his own were, before a long crack split across both walls and up to the ceiling.

The sound of a ceiling caving in was just like he remembered, too.

He squeezed his eyes shut.

His mouth tastes like ash.

As a kid, Percy had loved the warm weather. It meant summer, road trips with his mom, going to Montauk. Later, it meant laying in the strawberry fields with Annabeth and Grover, playing capture the flag, and scaling the climbing wall.

Tartarus ruined it for him. Everything burned, from the air to the waters of the Phlegathon. When he'd crawled out of the Doors of Death into the cavern, he'd almost passed out at the abrupt change in temperature. The cool air on his exposed skin felt foreign and strange. Once he'd gotten back on the Argo, he'd just laid on the floor of his room, trying to readjust to the atmosphere.

Ever since then, he'd always preferred colder weather.

It'd been uncomfortably warm when he'd first gotten to the explosion upstairs. It had gotten better as they'd gotten downstairs, but it was back, now. He's fairly certain he's sweating a bit, but that was most likely from the exertion rather than the unnatural heat. His ears are ringing, eyes burning from the burning ash and dust, and he blinks furiously.

He can still smell the blood, from MJ's head wound and the long cut on Charles's arm, and rapidly healing ones on Peter, and the other assortment the kids had collected in the blast. It's coming from him, too. Coating his palms, making them slick against the concrete that tore through his flesh. It stings horribly, but he doesn't budge.

Percy closes his eyes, suddenly aware that his eyes aren't just stinging from the air. Eight heartbeats. Three he knew, five he hadn't. There's a cut on his lip, stinging every time he grimaces. How could he have not realized?

Peter is laying on his back, coughing so hard Percy can feel his ribs creak. But he feels no breaks, just a few bruises. Still eight heartbeats. He hadn't failed them, not yet.

Percy feels the quakes before he hears them. The ground vibrates under his feet, and he can feel it deep in his bones. He knows, now, that something bad was indeed going to happen in he lost his footing. The second time around, it still reminds him of Porphyron. His throat closes up at the thought.

Percy flinches, just like he had in the dream. Above him, the ceiling groans dangerously. The spear had run him through like he was nothing. Nothing quite made you feel small like a Giant King did, Percy had learned.

Well, barring two things, he supposed.

Tartarus was indescribable. Mortal brains, half God or not, were simply not made to comprehend something like the Pit God. Gaea had scrambled together a form of Earth, ripping up dirt and rocks

and trees. Tartarus hadn't done that.

But even the Primordial hadn't come close to making Percy feel as small as he did when he was around Gabe Ugliano.

Percy heard the distant murmur of voices, Peter and his friends shakily picking themselves up for the second time that day. Despite the fact that they were all still alive, Percy couldn't help but feel like he'd failed.

Adrian Toomes was not a bad man.

It wasn't him, it was the world. He was a monster of the world's making—nothing more, nothing less. He only did what he needed to survive, to take care of his family, his *child*. As a young man, Toomes never would have imagined he'd end up dealing in alien weapons. Back then, even aliens were just a myth.

Now, it was a world of supersoldiers and gods, and he was a working man who just needed to keep up. For his family.

When Spider-Man first started getting involved, Toomes had wanted to kill him. But then he connected the dots between his daughter's wide-eyed date, the boy who looked at her with such adoration and clearly cared about her, and Toomes decided to give him an out.

Peter— *Peter Parker, a fifteen year old, Spider-Man was a **kid*** —didn't take it. And then Toomes knew he needed to die. That kid kept sticking his nose where it didn't belong, trying to take away his livelihood, how he got by and afforded Liz's tuition, their house, the food they put on their dinner table.

He hadn't felt bad when he collapsed the warehouse. If Spider-Man wanted to play the adult's game, he was going to get treated like one.

The kid survived. He went after Toomes *again*, somehow still standing. And Toomes ended up in a prison with no windows after a ten minute trial with him, a judge, and two lawyers. It took him months to even find out what the place was called—The Raft. For people who messed with things they shouldn't have, a guard with a harsh face had told him. He lived his life in an eight-by-six cell,

getting three bland, sludge-like meals delivered through a slot in the bars. An hour of exercise a day, just him and a few other prisoners. He knew there were more—there were far too many guards for just the dozen or so in his block.

It took even longer for him to find out that the other blocks were full of...other things. He wouldn't say people—they were far from human, these days. He swore sometimes when he went to sleep, he could hear inhuman roars and yells among the prisoners on the other side of the complex. He lost track of the days down there. The only way of telling was the passing of the seasons changing. By his guess, it had been almost two years. And every day, he woke up thinking of Peter Parker and how he was going to absolutely murder that kid when he got out.

And get out he did, because one day he woke up and someone was standing at his cell, a smile on their face and a proposition on their lips. A few hours later and a hole was blown into the building, and Toomes got to stretch his wings for the first time in what felt like a lifetime.

He'd truly hoped the bomb and the Hydra squad hadn't killed him. Sure, they could pick off the friends, but he hoped Peter would survive. Toomes wanted to be there when the life left his eyes, wanted to watch his blood spill over the tiles. The one thing he hadn't expected was to see a man standing in the hallway. He didn't look like much at first glance—a bit above average height, with a leaner build. Not even dressed for a fight, just in a sweater and pants with some scuffed sneakers. But as Toomes grew closer, something about him made the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

His hair wasn't just dark, but it was *black*, like the deepest parts of the ocean where not even plants could find a scrap of sunlight to keep themselves alive. When he smiled, his teeth were just a little too sharp, the canines just a little too long to be considered normal. His face was symmetrical, unnaturally so. Like an idealized version of a human, one who was just too perfect. Blood splattered his face, his neck, his arms and hands. He carried no weapon, but stood there like he knew something Toomes didn't. His voice carried just a little bit too much, held a little too much rasp. It echoed strangely, like every word pressed itself in between his ears and pushed on his sinuses.

The worst part was the eyes.

They were covered in scars, pale, paint-splatter scars going across the bridge of his nose and stretching to his temples. If asked, Toomes would tell you there wasn't a single word to describe the color of his irises. They were shifting, moving, thousands of tides and winds circling each other around his pupils, like somebody had captured storms and gifted them to him.

Toomes saw him and immediately knew there was something deeply wrong with this man. If he could even be called that.

He'd been around long enough to know that everyone bled, though. And right now, whatever sort of creature this man was, he was standing between him and his target. And then he brought up his family.

Toomes didn't feel a single bit of regret as he moved back and watched the ceiling collapse. The only emotion that was coursing through him was grim, grim satisfaction. Nobody, *nobody* brought up Doris and Liz.

He figured he'd wait a moment for the dust to settle before going after Peter. The kid couldn't have gotten far, anyways. Toomes waved his hand in front of his face, trying to clear the air in front of him. His helmet filtered all the debris for him to breathe, but it couldn't do much for the visibility.

That's when he saw it.

The walls, the load bearing ones, had been damaged specifically. Toomes was no fool—you didn't get this far in the game without some smarts. He knew how the ceiling would fall. Mainly in one piece, all except for his spot by the entrance, where he'd backtracked as the exo-suit did its work. The ceiling would fall, bringing the second floor down atop the first, and crushing everybody inside. Except for Peter, who would crawl his way out just like he did the first time, weakened and devastated by the deaths of his friends. And this time, Toomes would be there waiting for him.

That's not what happened.

He waits a long moment. Peter should be crawling out any minute now. The dust settled, and Toomes cautiously made his way towards where the rubble should be. He'd take the fight outside, where the kid wouldn't have anything to use his webs on. Toomes should win easily.

Should, should, should.

That's not what happens.

The ceiling had fallen, just like he'd intended. Chunks of rubble dotted the floor, spider-web cracks spanning the few pieces of wall that were intact. But the ceiling hadn't fallen all the way.

The ceiling had fallen, but Percy Jackson was standing with his feet planted, knees bent, head bowed, in the middle of the hallway.

Tonnes and tonnes of cinderblock and concrete and drywall were right on top of him, a couple feet lower than it should have been. He was standing, though, taking the weight on his shoulders and arms, holding up the entire fucking second floor of Midtown High School on his back.

Slowly, Toomes's hands fell to his sides. "What *are* you," He whispered.

He was sweating a little, straining under the immense weight. But his stance was steady, and his face was grimly determined. Toomes could've sworn he caught the glint of a sharp-toothed smile.

To his left, a sharp gasp came from one of the doorways, and Toomes's head snapped towards it. A girl with long black hair and a pair of singed overalls slapped her hands over her mouth, taking a step back. Toomes stared at her, then slowly grinned. "I recognize you. You were one of Liz's friends." It was not a friendly smile. "Where is Peter?"

She stared at him mutely, eyes flickering between him and the inhuman in the middle of the hall. Then, slowly, from behind her, a boy stepped out. He remembered Peter vividly—drawn in posture, like he was trying to hide from everyone around him. He had issues with eye contact, stuttered a little when he spoke, and nervousness oozed from every pore.

Now, though, Peter didn't hesitate in his stride, stepping in front of the group of teens that had slowly spilled out of the classroom. His spine was straight, shoulders square, and his fists balled up at his sides.

Toomes didn't hear this part. It was a moment held between Percy and Peter, the child hero and the man who used to be so much like him. Softly, barely an audible whisper, head bowed, Percy breathed one word.

"Run."

Peter's keen ears caught it immediately. The boy stood there for a moment longer, then turned to stare at Toomes. Trying to stare him down, Toomes supposed with a mental chuckle. The boy cast a look at his friend once more, then back to Toomes, his face unchanging.

Then, he smiled. Lightning fast, a flick of his wrist, and Toomes was slammed against the far wall, a web tangled up in his wings and pinning him to the lockers. “Go!” The boy yelled, turning on his heel and grabbing two of the teen’s wrists. It took a second for the order to settle in, but once it did, all of the kids joined Peter in his desperate sprint down the halls.

Toomes laughed. “Run, run, run!” He screamed after them. “I’ll find you!”

His wings cut through the webs with a clean slice. He dusted off the shoulders of his jacket, brushing away ash and dust. They wouldn’t get far, especially considering he would have the open air advantage as soon as they got outside. He’d take his time. Let Peter think he had a chance, that’d he’d somehow manage to beat Toomes twice in a row. Hunt him and his friends down, leave the inhuman man to get crushed under the building once he ran out of strength. He wouldn’t even have to do anything about it.

A voice stopped him in his tracks. “You’re going to leave those kids alone.”

Percy Jackson. Toomes could’ve sworn he’d heard the name before, somewhere. He looked towards the speaker, only to immediately avert his eyes, goosebumps trickling down his spine. “I gave you a chance to step away.” He said. “You made your choice.”

“Yeah,” The inhuman said breathlessly, strain evident in his voice. “Yeah, I did. It seems like you made yours as well. What’s it like being a deadbeat dad?”

Toomes’s voice was slow, cold as the fury he felt wash over him. “What did you just call me?”

“A deadbeat dad. You left your family behind, Adrian. Too consumed by your need for power, for revenge. Greed always gets people like you.” He said, and Toomes saw his arms tremble slightly under the weight.

“You have no idea,” He hissed. “I did this all for my family. For Liz.”

Somehow, the inhuman managed to let out a breathy laugh. “Breaking out of prison and hunting down a kid so you can murder him? I’m sure your daughter will be real pleased.”

“You know *nothing* about her.” Toomes said, low and dangerous.

“Sure, I do. Elizabeth Allan. Goes by Liz. AcDec ex-captain, 4.0 GPA, soccer team. Nice girl, really. I don’t see the resemblance. You know, when someone escapes prison, especially someone as high profile as you, they always interview the family. They’ve usually had something to do with it. Whether it’s helping with the escape, or just turning a blind eye...” The inhuman clicked his tongue. “Agents are probably already at her house. She’ll be detained, along with her mother. A day, maybe two days of interrogation if she’s lucky. If not...” He trailed off, a smile on his face. “Maybe they’ll end up in your spot at the Raft. Quotas to fill, you know?” He said, like a cat who caught a canary.

Toomes saw red.

“You lay a single finger on my daughter, and I’ll—”

“What, drop a building on me? You really seem like a one trick horse, Adrian. I’m not very impressed. Like I said earlier, big man picking on some kids. Pathetic. You’re not even that smart, are you?”

Toomes was well past *angry*. Apoplectic was the only word that could properly describe what he was feeling. How a man trapped under thousands of tonnes of rubble could rile him up so much, he didn’t know. He was shaking, blood roaring in his ears. He took a step forward, ready to end this abomination right then.

“Quite stupid, I think. I mean, honestly. How can you not even realize when somebody is stalling?”

He froze. “What?”

Another shark-like grin. This time, Toomes was close enough to see the blood on his teeth. “Honestly. Those kids are long gone, probably already off the property. It’s just you and me, Toomes. You, me, and the thousands of tonnes of building that I’m holding.”

The color drained from his face. His hand went to the controls of his exo-suit—he could get out of here, program it to go after the kids, to find them, kill them at any cost, even if he didn’t make it out. He was an inch away from pressing it, his hand wrapped around the small remote, thumb hovering on the button.

Then, he froze. Not like a second ago, out of shock and confusion.

No, this was different.

He tried to move—he really did. But it was like he’d lost control of his own limbs. Against his will, he dropped the remote. Then the pain came.

Toomes let out a breathy gasp, trying to double over but unable to. It was like fire burning in his veins, a thousand needles poking into his skin, his bones grinding against one another. It was every agony imaginable, everywhere all at once. The blinding, white-hot kind, that made everything seem like it was underwater and the only thing that was real was the hurt.

“I told you, you were going to leave those kids alone.”

He felt tears escape his eyes. Slowly, his body lowered to the ground, until he was laying flat on his back, staring up at the ruined ceiling.

“You dropped a warehouse on Peter. He was *fifteen*, you sick motherfucker. People like you...they don’t deserve second chances. You messed with someone you shouldn’t have, Toomes. A word of advice? There’s always somebody looking out for the little guy.”

Percy Jackson. He had introduced himself. At the time, Toomes had thought it was an idiotic move. Why tell an enemy your name? But now, he realized. This inhuman had planned on killing him since the second he stepped foot in the school. He couldn’t breathe, like all the wind was being knocked out of him. Toomes wanted to scream, but found he couldn’t make the noise. His hands came up, resting on his shoulders as his arms crossed over his chest.

Above him, the inhuman straightened, the structure groaning precariously. “Big fish,” He said. “Small pond.”

Shark-like was the perfect was to describe this creature.

Toomes wanted to close his eyes, but knew he wouldn’t be afforded the mercy. Like a puppet, his eyes stayed glued open as the inhuman let go, and Toomes was buried alive in the grave he dug.

whats this? an early update? perhaps.

rip to SWORD ig. big f

"I've met a lot of big men, and they always end up smaller than you think." cue the thirst edits

percy was bluffing about the whole liz going to the raft thing btw. the only thing that happened to her and her mom was the fact that they were alerted he broke out.

percy jackson in a life threatening situation and his IMMEDIATE choice is to escalate it via devastating insults

yeah so. thats what percy's dream was about. one of them, at least. that one from chapter 12 is still biding its time.

percy's face just being a little too perfect...too perfectly proportioned...like something imitating a human...good shit. also this boy held the sky. he can hold a fucking ceiling.

"Big fish, small pond." ok you dramatic bitch

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Shot Put

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tuesday, August 14th

2:10 PM

Midtown School of Science and Technology, NY

Peter was a mess of emotions.

Seeing Toomes again was like his blood turning to ice in his veins. It was like Homecoming all over again, hearing the whirring of the exo-suit and watching Toomes smile at him as he pressed the button.

The truth was, Toomes terrified Peter. More than he thought he ever would be, not since he was eight years old and sitting in front of a therapist gently asking him about his babysitter, his Aunt and Uncle watching to the side with bated breath and prayers on their lips, hoping it wasn't true.

Peter never thought he'd be scared like that again. But Toomes made him feel like that tiny elementary school kid, made him feel *small*.

When he moved in front of Cindy, pushing the rest of his friends behind him in the hallway, he could hear his own heart trying to beat out of his chest, his blood rushing in his ears. But he did it anyway. He looked at Percy, who was holding a school on his back, hair hanging in front of his face and sweat beading down his temple.

He had caught the building.

Peter wasn't buried. Percy had caught it.

He barely kept himself from bursting into tears. Percy had caught it.

He said run, and Peter grabbed Ned and MJ by the wrists and they all made a break for the exit.

They didn't slow down even a little bit as they turned corners and Peter slammed his shoulder into the push bar of the emergency exit near the science labs. It was so bright outside everybody winced, holding hands up to shield their eyes from the sun's rays.

Outside. They were safe. No roof above them.

Distantly, he knew that everybody was bent over, hands on their knees or the back of their head, catching their breath, sucking in lungfuls of the warm, ash-free air. Peter couldn't even bring himself to pretend to be winded with the rest of them. He instead stared, transfixed, at his crumbling school.

MJ's hand landed on his shoulder, and he jumped about a foot in the air, whipping around to look at her. Immediately, she backed off. Peter took in a shaky breath, only to realize that everyone was now staring at him. Cindy, still leaning on Charles, Betty and Sally, Abe and Ned. He looked down at the grass.

How was he even going to explain all of this?

"The building," Sally said hoarsely. "He...he caught it."

Peter looked up. Swallowed. "Yeah." He whispered. "He did."

Everybody looked about as dazed as he felt, alternating between Peter and their ruined school. Nobody even asked any questions, they just *stared*. Peter made eye contact with Ned, who just gave him an incredibly sad look. Eventually, Ned shook his head. "I really don't think there's a way out of this one, Pete." He said, a sense of finality mixed with dread in his voice.

Peter rubbed a hand down his face. "I know." He murmured. "God, I know."

"What's going on, Peter?" Charles asked, eyes tellingly wet. "What just happened?" His lower lip was trembling. Peter squeezed his eyes shut. "I'm sorry." He whispered. "It's all my fault. All of it."

"I doubt that." Betty said. "I'm...I'm sure whatever it is, Peter, we can work it out." She looked desperate. "Everything will be fine. Your—your friend. We need to go get him out of there, and then we'll figure this out, and everything will be fine." She rambled.

MJ and Ned shared a look. “He can handle it in there.” They said in unison. If Percy told them to get out, they listened and got the hell out. The two of them didn’t know the true extent of Percy’s destructive capabilities—Peter doubted anybody did, really. But they did recognize that if he told them to run, he had a damn good reason.

Abe blinked. “Alright...” He said slowly. “But seriously, what the fuck is happening? Is that Liz’s dad?”

Peter tugged at his hair. “Yes. His name is Adrian Toomes. He was a Chitauri weapons dealer, and he really hates me.”

“Peter shut down his operation a while back.” Ned added in helpfully. “Put Toomes in jail.”

Abe gaped.

“Do you hear that?” Peter suddenly said, turning around. “Please tell me you guys hear that. Or not. Maybe I’m hearing things. That actually might be better.”

MJ, looking awfully concerned, put a hand on his elbow. Peter didn’t jump this time, focused on a spot across the football field. MJ’s brow furrowed as she listened. “Yeah...” She said slowly. “Yeah I hear that.”

Everyone else quieted down, straining their ears. And, sure enough, a loud thud like a beating drum was getting louder and louder. “You’ve got to be kidding me.” Betty whispered as it got closer. “That’s definitely something, isn’t it?”

Peter didn’t look away from the direction where the sound was coming from. “Somebody.” He corrected. “I can hear a heartbeat. It’s very loud. Strange.”

“I’m sorry, you can *hear* a heartbeat?”

Peter offered no clarification. Slowly, his friends came to stand in a loose group behind him, squinting across the football field and the track as a shape slowly came into view. The first thing Peter thought was *big*. Not like Sergeant Barnes, who was tall and broad in the shoulders, but

just...big. If he had to guess, he'd say over seven feet tall. The man seemed to be wearing some sort of armor, gunmetal gray and worn at the edges. His legs were as thick as tree trunks, and centered right at the middle of his forehead was a large, curved metal horn, gleaming in the August sun.

And he was *fast*. Peter was used to having the advantage of speed in a fight, being the little guy who made up for it in agility. But this man, whoever he was, had come up the slight hill that led to their school, crossed the track, and was halfway across the football field in less than a second. And he wasn't slowing down.

Peter's eyes widened. "*Run!*"

Everybody dove to the side, scrambling away from their spot on the pavement. Just in time, too. The man beared down on them, past the goal line and over the other side of the track. He skidded to a stop, and his giant horn tore through the bleachers like they were made of tissue paper. The man raised his head, and locked his eyes on Peter.

He smiled at him, teeth chipped and yellowed. "You are the Spider." He noted. He had a thick accent—Russian, he was fairly sure. Peter swallowed, then nodded tersely. Behind him, he heard Betty gasp. The man smiled. "Rhino will crush Spider like bug."

It's always the ones who speak in the third person, Peter despaired. This was normally the part where he would let loose a quip, something about how spiders were arachnids, actually. But all that came out, sounding more defeated than he would have liked, was, "Why?"

The man, the Rhino, just inclined his armored head. "Toomes offer money. Lots."

Peter couldn't help the slump of his shoulders. One thing he had slowly come to understand over the years, ever since Uncle Ben had bled out in his arms because of the twenty bucks in a cash register, was that when faced with a choice between money and a human being, people often chose the former.

He felt resigned, and oddly enough, so, so angry.

No—scratch that. Peter wasn't angry. He was *furious*.

Toomes had come to his school, bringing a Hydra squad and *this* assclown with him, tried to kill his friends and then drop another goddamn fucking building on Peter. All while pretending he was a good father, like he actually gave a shit about Liz. Peter remembered her face, the permanently shiny eyes and red nose right before she moved away.

Peter remembered. MJ pressing her sleeve to staunch the blood flow from her head, Ned stumbling when he tried to stand, Cindy's confused voice and vacant expression, Abe's scream as Percy set his leg. Peter remembered the certainty he was going to die in that warehouse, the desperation that left his arms shaking as he pushed himself out.

Come on, Spider-Man.

Percy's breathless voice as he told them to run, the blood on his face and the burn on his back from the baton. His friend was still in there, struggling underneath it all, *alone* with Toomes.

Percy could handle it. Percy was strong. Toomes was Peter's ghost to deal with, Percy was stuck with him anyway, and Peter could do *nothing* about it. Nothing, like when he noticed that something was wrong on the floor above Delmars, but didn't say anything, didn't look into it, and Mr. Stark was almost killed and Percy ended up in the ICU because of it. Nothing, like when he was barely conscious as he laid in that cell with Mr. Stark, nothing like when Percy *died* in Ontario and Peter couldn't even stay awake.

Peter became a hero to help people. To defend those who couldn't defend themselves. He could crawl up buildings and catch flying cars, so why did he feel so *helpless*? Why did he still feel like that nine-year-old sitting in a therapist's office?

He'd run from Toomes, like he'd run from Ben and May's after that argument, and Ben followed him, because of course he had. He hid, like he'd hide from Flash, taken his words and his fists, and never told anybody. Never spoke up, like Skip, how he held his silence for months. He never did admit it directly to May or Ben.

Peter was just so incredibly *sick* of being the little guy.

He was trembling, he was pretty sure, as he rolled up the sleeves to his flannel. He looked back over his shoulder, at Ned and MJ, the rest of his friends. "Go back to the building." He said softly.

Ned's eyes widened. "Peter..."

Peter's face was flinty and hard. "Go."

Slowly, they all moved back, off the edge of the track and past the bleachers, going to stand all the way back at the edge of the field, as close as they could safely get to the building.

Peter stared up at the Rhino. He tilted his head to the side, eyes narrowing. "Do it, then." He said quietly. Then, louder, almost a yell, "Come on!"

The behemoth of a man looked a tad confused, but didn't seem to put much thought on Peter's change of attitude. He lowered himself onto all fours, the armor around him whirring and shifting. Then, he started running. He was even faster than Peter had originally estimated—actual rhinos ran at around thirty miles per hour, and he would guess this man was a little bit faster than that.

Rhinos were fast for their size.

So were spiders.

Peter didn't even bother with his webs; there was nothing to attach them to nearby. Instead, he jumped upwards, flying through the air in a graceful arc that was second nature to him. He went right over the Rhino's head, landing a few feet behind the man.

The Rhino had most certainly seen him jump, but didn't stop in his charge until he'd gone another few yards, mechanical feet and hands ripping up grass. Peter's eyes grew calculating. It wasn't that he didn't see Peter move, but rather that once he was charging, he couldn't easily stop.

"Hey, dumbass!" Peter yelled. The Rhino turned around, a snarl on his face. Peter bared his teeth at him. "You missed."

The man's nostrils flared. He lowered himself into another charge. This time, instead of immediately jumping, Peter watched how he ran. The suit was fitted to his form abnormally well. It looked...well, it almost looked like it was fused to his skin, which was cringe-inducing. He seemed to put all his power into his charges, an unstoppable force of momentum.

Peter ducked to the side, cutting it so close that the razor-sharp tip of the horn grazed his oversized

flannel, slicing a long gouge in the fabric. He spun, fists up, and delivered a right hook directly to the man's cheek. The Rhino stumbled, looking a little dazed.

As a rule, Peter always held back on his strength. It would be so easy to just knock out criminals with a single punch, to crack skulls and bust teeth and jaws.

But he would never be that kind of man.

He webbed people up, sat them down if they looked like they might fall over. Spider-Man was a vigilante, but he was gentle. The mask was more than fabric and circuits; it was a symbol. It meant pulling his punches, not making full use of the strength simmering under his skin. It meant safety.

Peter wasn't wearing a mask now. Toomes hadn't come for Spider-Man, he'd come for *Peter*. There was no reputation to uphold here.

If the Rhino and Toomes wanted Peter Parker, he'd give them Peter Parker.

The man swiped an armored hand in his direction, and Peter barely dodged. The armored fist hit the ground where he'd been standing, the force almost throwing Peter off his feet. When the Rhino lifted his hand, there was a crater where it once stood. Peter swallowed.

He swung again. Peter dodged again. The ground shook under the Rhino's feet as he stomped and lunged at Peter. He hit the ground, rolling between the man's legs and coming up into a crouch.

This time, Peter aimed a kick to the back of the man's legs that made him crumple to his knees. But a second later, he was up again. The metal—it almost felt like hide, in places—was too thick for Peter's hits to do much damage. This wasn't like a normal fight. A few quick jabs wouldn't do the job.

The Rhino's fist came swinging, and Peter could both hear and feel the wind whistling by his ear as his punch didn't connect. The Rhino was strong, fast, and durable.

He didn't seem all that smart, though.

“Oh, come on, man. You gotta do better than that!” Peter called teasingly. Then, he took a few steps back, casually stretching his arms. “I’m all warmed up now, you?”

He got no response except for a roar. The Rhino lowered his head, and Peter couldn’t help the apprehension that rose at the sharpened tip. But his eyes flickered over the Rhino’s shoulder, to his friends standing in a close group, gripping each other tightly.

Peter could do this.

He turned tail, and ran. His sneakers tore up the grass on the football field, but it was nothing compared to the earth-shaking steps of the man bearing down on him. He risked a look behind him, then sped up into a sprint.

Ten yard line.

The Rhino’s face was nothing but a snarl, eyes narrowed and squinty. His footsteps fell perfectly in time with Peter’s racing heart.

Twenty yard line.

Peter’s chest still ached from the blast earlier, lungs feeling raw as his breathing grew more ragged.

Thirty yard line.

His spidey-sense screamed, and Peter clenched his jaw. It was pounding in his head, down his spine, spreading out across his arms all the way to his tingling fingertips.

Forty yard line.

He could see his destination, now. Peter’s attributes and abilities were proportionate to that of a real spider—albeit a radioactive, genetically modified, cracked up one. It took him a second, but he figured it out; the Rhino’s charges were like that of a real one, too. Power and speed, but severely lacking in the ability to turn or come to a sudden stop. At first, Peter had thought that he could use

that against him. Superior agility and all, so the guy wouldn't even be able to touch him. And, maybe another day, that *would* work. But at the moment, Peter was not only on a time crunch, but was pumped full of adrenaline and rage that had been simmering under his skin for the past decade.

Peter was done playing around. No more jumping, no dodging, no ducking.

As soon as the toe of his sneaker hit the white fifty yard line, Peter stopped. He'd gained a momentary lead on the man, just enough for Peter to come to a full halt, but not for the Rhino to. As he turned to face the man, two feet taller and probably a couple hundred pounds heavier, horn pointed right at his torso, Peter found himself with a startling absence of fear.

Funnily enough, he didn't think he'd ever felt less scared.

The only thing that coursed through his veins was white hot anger. At the Rhino, at the Hydra squad for attacking his friends, at Toomes for hurting him.

Peter put his hands in front of his chest and braced himself, bending his knees.

He remembered the first time he'd gone down to the gym with Percy. He'd been drowning in a hoodie, having to forego his binder. It'd been strange to move around in it, too baggy and constantly getting in his way. Ten minutes in, Percy had sighed. "Kid, if it's really that cold, you can turn up the heat. I don't feel the difference."

Peter's face had turned scarlet, and he'd mumbled something about not wearing his binder. The suit Mr. Stark had made for him had a clever mix of padding and a tight sports bra that made his chest flat without being harmful—but the suit was laying somewhere in the labs upstairs.

Percy had nodded, thankfully not making fun of him. Then, "If you're worried about how you'll look, Pete, I *am* blind."

Peter opened his mouth. Closed it.

Percy threw back his head and laughed. This had been before Ontario, before SWORD, Sergeant Barnes, the trafficking. Percy had looked much more carefree, his laugh loud and echoing. It was warm, the type of sound that automatically made you smile. Peter really liked Percy's laugh. It crinkled his eyes and made his dimples show up. Despite whatever was happening, when Percy laughed, it was like everything was alright, just for a second.

“Did you forget?”

“Maybe.” Peter had admitted.

Later, they’d been standing in front of a row of punching bags, Percy offering occasional tips on his form. His face had grown serious, and Peter unconsciously straightened at the look.

“One day,” Percy had said, “There’s going to be a fight when you can’t hold back.” He held a hand out at Peter’s protest. “You might not like it, but it’ll come. It always does.” Like he knew it all too well. “You’re going to need to hit fast, and hit hard. Don’t think about how much it’s going to hurt. That’s how you’ll choke. Just do it. Throw all your strength into it and punch like you’re trying to hit three feet behind the target.”

Don’t think about how much it’s going to hurt.

He set his jaw, and as the Rhino came barreling into him, Peter wrapped his hands around the curve of his giant horn, letting them collide. He skidded back with the man, the point of it pressing dangerously close to his heart.

His sneakers dug grooves into the grass as he pushed back against the man, legs trembling as he held his ground.

He was mad at the Rogue Avengers for hurting Mr. Stark, remembering how the man clutched at his chest where the arc reactor lay, how he ran his fingers over the ruined armor with the shield-shaped wound, right at the heart. He was mad at the Doctor for taking Percy, for seizing his powers and twisting them into something cruel, for making Percy wake up screaming every night for the months afterwards. He was mad at everybody who had hurt Sergeant Barnes, who seemed loyal and *kind*, but terrified of himself.

Peter was mad at Uncle Ben for being a hero, for following Peter. He was mad at Skip for ripping away the remains of his childhood, when he’d *trusted* him. He was mad at his parents for getting on that stupid plane.

He was mad at himself, for not being able to do a single thing to change any of that.

For the first time, Peter let himself revel in the anger. He didn't push it aside, look for a silver lining. He fell back into his rage, enveloping himself in it. He couldn't bring back Ben or his parents, change what kind of man Skip was, be in Siberia with Mr. Stark or the lab in Ontario with Percy. But he was here, at his ruined school, his friends counting on him.

Then, slowly, Peter took a step forward.

He pushed with his legs, upwards and back, and took another. The Rhino stumbled back, but Peter didn't let go. His knuckles were white, and he could hear the creak of his muscles and joints.

Another step.

Come on, Spider-Man.

The Rhino was pushing back, tree-trunk thick legs covered in armor straining. Peter, short, skinny, poor-little-orphan Peter, barely reaching up to the man's ribs, gained his ground inch by inch, never letting up on his grip. The Rhino gave an enraged roar, renewing his efforts to push Peter to the ground, to make him stumble, to run him through with his horn.

"I will *crush* you!" The man screamed.

Peter had been crushed, once. Under thousands of pounds of warped steel and concrete. Peter had unburied himself, no suit, no AI, no *help*. He'd lifted a building off of his head, coughing up ash and blood, and stood up.

Come on, Spider-Man.

He'd been crushed once.

Never again.

His arms were trembling, sweat beading down his neck. Peter roared, a guttural sound of pure fury, and he *ran*. His legs pushed off the ground, and the Rhino skidded backwards as Peter pushed him across the football field like the world's largest training dummy. The man was stumbling for

purchase on the ground, but found none.

Peter's grip tightened even further on the horn, and as his worn sneaker hit the ground once more, he spun on the balls of his feet, bringing his arms up as he moved. Peter spun, and he *threw* the Rhino like a shot put.

The man crashed into the opposite side of the field, head hitting the goal post so hard that the metal bent.

Panting, Peter walked towards his crumbled form. He looked down at the Rhino, fist clenched.

Throw all your strength into it and punch like you're trying to hit three feet behind the target.

The resounding *crack* of the impact was surely heard well across the field. Peter shook his bloodied hand, and turned away from the unconscious man.

MJ and Ned got to him first. MJ, for the first time in his life, pulled him into a hug. She smelled like coconut and book pages, and was the perfect height for him to bury his face in her shoulder. "Fucking dumbass," She whispered. When they separated, her hands still on his shoulders, he saw her eyes were wide and frantic in a way he'd never seen. "I got so scared, I think I peed a little." She said flatly.

Despite it all, Peter laughed. "No shit?"

She shook her head. "No shit."

Ned tugged him into a hug, too. Ned's hugs were also great. Very warm. "That was so badass, dude." He said as he let go. Peter couldn't help the small smile. "Thanks, man."

Then, slowly, he turned to the rest of his friends. They were staring at him with various expressions of shock, disbelief, and awe.

Peter had been dreading this moment for a very long time. He'd always thought it'd be stressful, having to explain everything. Maybe it was just the adrenaline crash, but he felt oddly relieved.

Hiding secrets from his team was rough, and he was sort of glad to finally let them into this part of his life.

Except Flash.

Fuck Flash.

Peter let out a breath, an arm still slung over Ned's shoulders. MJ stepped up next to his other side and grabbed his hand. In any other situation, Peter probably would have fainted like a Victorian madam, but he'd been feeling lightheaded for a while already, so he was used to it.

"This," Peter acknowledged. "Isn't really how I wanted this to go."

Ned and MJ nod solemnly.

"Uh. So. I'm Spider-Man. Got bit by a funny lil' spider. Fell victim to radiation poisoning. Got a fever of 107. Threw up blood and maybe an organ. Made a super suit. Started punching people. It's tight." He nodded.

Betty passed out.

Charles, Abe, Sally, and Cindy looked down at her, then up at Peter. "She...she's in the grass. She'll be fine." Abe said.

A couple dozen yards away, their school collapsed with a loud *crash* that shook the ground and made Cindy stumble. Charles stuck out an arm and caught her, tugging her in close to him. He was facing away, staring at the school, the action automatic. He missed Cindy's dazed look and bright pink cheeks.

Peter, however, did not. He and Ned exchanged raised eyebrows. Yes, their school was collapsing, but they also lived for the drama.

"Your friend," Sally whispered, white as a sheet. Abe covered his mouth in horror. Peter squinted at the pile of rubble. "I'd give it a minute before you put in the mental effort of freaking out."

Nobody responded to that.

And, lo and behold, a minute later, Percy Jackson came stumbling out of the rubble, coated in a thick layer of dust and plaster that made his hair a chalky white. As he grew closer, he shook like a dog, dispelling most of it into a hazy cloud around him.

Peter inhaled sharply. “Toomes?”

Percy gave a nonchalant shrug, brushing off his shoulders. “I warned him.” Was all he said.

Peter knew it was bad to be relieved somebody was dead. But relief was all he could muster up in regards to that pathetic man. “There’s an unconscious Rhino man on our football field.”

That got him a nod. “You took care of him.” There wasn’t an ounce of doubt in Percy’s voice—it was more of a statement to himself, than anything. Peter nodded anyway, and Percy held out his hand—scraped raw in places—and Peter gently high-fived him.

“I’ll call in someone to take care of him. I already called the paramedics, they’ll be here soon enough to give you kids a check over. After that, I’m taking you all home.” His voice left no room for argument. Peter bristled a little, and Percy sighed. “You did good, kid.” He said. “Real good. I’m damn proud. And now, your Aunt needs you.”

Peter couldn’t help the warm feeling in his chest at the praise. “Fine.” He agreed after a second. “You’re right.”

Percy winked. “Always am.” Behind them, Abe and Sally looked a little faint. Peter didn’t think it was because of the stress or injuries they’d collected.

Percy quietly added, “Look after my family, yeah?”

Peter gave him a wide-eyed look. Family was *everything* to Percy. The fact that he was trusting Peter to do this...

The boy straightened. “You can count on me.”

Percy ruffled his hair. “I know.” His smile was genuine, but a little strained. “I know.”

Abe and Sally looked a bit dazed, but otherwise fine. MJ’s head had stopped bleeding, and Ned had stopped clutching his ribs. There was probably a nasty bruise there, but Peter didn’t think they were broken. Charles was still holding on to Cindy, who was swaying more and more by the minute. Quite honestly, Peter thought it was a miracle she’d made it this far without throwing up. He’d gotten a fair number of concussions, and they felt like *shit*. Cindy Moon was made of tough material.

Percy looked a tad concerned. “Can she walk?” He muttered to Charles, who instantly looked flustered. “I...no. Probably not.” Percy winced, and gently tapped Cindy on the arm. “There’s an ambulance coming. I’m gonna pick you up. That alright?”

Cindy’s words were a little slurred. “Hell yeah it is.”

That got her an odd look, but Percy nonetheless braced an arm under her knees and across her back, easily picking her up. Cindy leaned her head against his chest, a dazed grin on her face. Charles, Abe, and Sally looked envious, but also distinctly proud of their friend.

“At least one of us get’s a piece of that,” Abe murmured. Peter gave him a flat look.

Percy took one step before pausing. “Hey, why’s she on the floor?” He asked, nodding towards Betty.

Peter winced. “Ah.”

Chapter End Notes

me, putting out a chapter every day or so: you get an update! you get an update!
EVERYONE GETS AN UPDATE

but yeah basically i have so many of these bad boys written already, im so ahead of
schedule, so i figured, fuck it. ill start posting all willy nilly

expect annoyingly constant updates for the next few days <3

anyways, enjoy some peter content. i love spider-man as a character so much, and i wish i could feature him more in here. might fuck around and do a peter parker centric fic once im done with this series

nobody:

me: LET PETER PARKER BE ANGRY!! LET HIM BE FURIOUS!!! LET MY BOY BE FULL OF RAGE!!! HE IS NOT ALL SOFT SUNSHINE AND FLOWERS AND I DEMAND IT BE RECOGNIZED

if any of you picked up on the parallels between peter's fight with the rhino and percy's fight with porphyron way back in the demigod's interlude, i love you

you can really tell where peter learned his general attitude from
tony and percy have taught him well

not pictured: sally, lucas, estelle, paul, may, and peter sitting in the jackson apartment with mrs. o'leary watching tv and eating takeout after this chapter

in case you were wondering, the acdec team goes home and plans to get together to make shirts that just have pictures of percy with hearts around it

plumbing baby. goodbye,

Boiler Room

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tuesday, August 14th

2:02 PM

New York Presbyterian Queens Hospital

“Your laptop.” Dan demanded, and it was already in Lee’s hands. She logged in, then dropped it on his lap. As soon as it was out of her hands, she stood up and walked to the windows, drawing the curtains all the way shut. Then to the door, standing to the side of it.

Out of his peripheral, he watched her pull her gun out of her bag and flip off the safety.

His hands stilled for just a moment as the computer booted up. Dan had to remind himself that he was better, now. He couldn’t stand on his own or walk more than a few steps, sit up for extended periods of time. But he could quell the tremors in his hands. He could do this.

Dan took a deep breath, and got to work.

The hospital’s free wifi wasn’t great, so he, in a move that was only slightly illegal, got ahold of the staff password and connected to the network. Lee’s computer was different than his, but held a wealth of information she was privy to as second in command. Dan made a conscious effort to not let his eyes stray as he clicked through, scanning desperately.

He didn’t even have to ask if she was connected to the security cameras—Lee was just the type of person to have a login out of paranoia. Dan still mentally cheered when he pulled up the window.

He only saw it for a second—the first panel was of the hallway twisting to the right of the entrance, towards the bullpen. And in the corner, he saw a blur of black and gunmetal gray, grainy and moving quickly. But it was, undoubtedly, tactical gear and weapons. The men, and he had a sickly feeling of who they were, moved across their building in a group.

And then, one by one, the cameras went out, reducing to a window full of static. Dan swore.

Lee's phone was out, and she was dialing a number. Each time, it went straight to voicemail. Frustrated, she jammed her phone into her pocket. "Jackson's not answering." She relayed. "We need to get the hell out of here."

Dan swallowed. This was bad.

"I—I can't walk." He said, the words burning a little. Lee just nodded, her brow knitting and lips pursing. It was the exact same face she'd made back in their Academy days when she'd found out his newly ex-girlfriend had been holding some...private photos he'd been unaware she'd even had over his head as leverage. He'd come home from a class two hours later to find Lee with split knuckles and holding an ice pack to her jaw. "She won't be a problem, anymore." Was all she'd said.

"Be right back." Lee said, unlocking and ducking out of the door before he could even protest.

He blinks a couple times as the doorway, then back down at the computer. The security cameras were cut, all right, but he had no idea how. Just like how somebody got into the building to leave a head on the table. It made no sense.

He'd so focused on trying to find a workaround to access the Hub's security systems he doesn't even notice Lee come into the room.

"Hop in. We're leaving." She says, leaning on a wheelchair she'd rolled right up to the edge of his bed. Dan raised his eyebrows—did she steal that? But ultimately just shrugs, and with a little bit of her help, shifts off the bed and into the chair. He's about to close the computer, but she just shakes her head. "Keep trying." She commands.

And, with that, she kicks off the brakes of the chair and wheels him out of the room.

Dan tries to keep all his focus on the computer, his fingers flying across the keys, but Lee is practically sprinting down the hallways, not even putting in the effort to dodge people, forcing them to jump out of the way.

They make it to the elevator, and Dan takes the second to smooth down his hair and give her a look.

“What?” She says defensively.

“I think we missed a nurse. You wanna go back and run her over?” He asks, looking at her like she’s insane.

Lee rolls her eyes. “Get back to your typing, computer boy.”

He goes back to his typing. They reach the ground floor with a ding, and Lee doesn’t wait for the doors to open all the way before pushing him out. They make it into the lobby, taking curves alarmingly fast. Behind them, Dan hears an alarmed yell.

Ah, those would be the hospital staff.

“...Go faster.” He says after a second.

The ambulance takes a few minutes to arrive. A few minutes in which Percy stands on the sidewalk in front of a crumbling, charred school, a half-conscious and most definitely delirious teenager in his arms. Peter is at his side, having woken Betty up and now avoiding her gaze. Hers, and everyone else’s. Ned and MJ are glued to his sides, a defiant tilt to their heads despite it all.

“How long?” Abe says finally.

Peter doesn’t look over at him, eyes focused on the horizon in front of them. “Since I was fourteen.”

Percy’s lips twitch up. The kid sounds so nonchalant, not freaking out like he would’ve been a few months ago. He’s grown up, alright. “You told ‘em?”

“Throwing the seven-hundred pound man across a football field tipped them off.” MJ informs him.

“Ah. That’ll do it.”

“Wait,” Betty says, eyes still wide. “Who are you, then?”

“Depends on who you ask, really.” Percy says airily. Cindy mumbles something intelligible and reaches out and pokes a finger into his cheek. Ned snorts. “Tony Stark’s illegitimate half brother, Peter’s ornithologist older brother, PJ, Peter Johnson, the ex-president of the Moms Against Vaping club of Gary, Indiana...” He waves a hand. “It’s a long list.”

Betty looks between him and Peter. “You...you two are related?”

“No.” They say in unison.

She looks about as dazed as Cindy. “So...what do you do?”

“Oh,” Percy says, as if just realizes what she means. “I’m the guy that controls the Thor bot.”

“Thor bot?” Charles cuts in.

Percy doesn’t miss a beat. “What, you didn’t think that guy was real, did you?”

“I’ve seen him peel back his skin to reveal the circuitry beneath.” Peter says, nodding. “It’s sickening.”

“Heh...peel.” Cindy mumbles.

“Black Widow’s a robot, too.” MJ says blandly. Ned makes an agreeing noise. “I walked in on her charging, once. It was a little weird.”

“What about Hawkeye?” Charles says, distressed.

Peter and MJ share looks, then shrug. “We have no idea where that guy came from.” They say in unison.

By the time the ambulance pulls up, everyone is stunned into silence, and Percy is making excellent use of his poker face. Cindy is absolutely concussed, and as everyone’s parents show up, hers ride with her to the hospital. Other than that, it’s mostly burns and bruises and scrapes. Charles’s wrist is sprained, and MJ gets a neat row of butterfly strips across her forehead.

By the time everyone’s gone, Peter and Percy walk around the school to the staff parking lot. Tony’s car still sitting there, unharmed. Percy moves to get in the passenger seat, and Peter squeaks. “I—I just got my permit!” He exclaims.

Percy pulls a face. “I’m blind, Peter.”

“You—you drove here!”

He can only imagine the look on Peter’s face when the car starts driving itself, but Percy treasures the spluttering sound he makes. As FRIDAY pulls the car out of the parking lot, Percy digs his phone out of his pocket and puts in his earbuds.

Six missed calls. Yikes.

One from Tony, five from Lee.

He called Tony, first. The man picked up on the first ring.

“I got Peter.” Percy immediately started with. “He’s in the car with me. May’s at my mom’s apartment with my family and Lea—I’m dropping him off there.”

“Is it safe?” Is all Tony asked.

“My cousin fortified that place with magic so strong it’ll repel a nuke, Lea’s there, and my mom is quite the shot. They’ll be fine.”

He can hear Tony’s relieved sigh clear as day. “Okay. I took the ad down, and I’m working on tracing it now.”

Percy nodded, despite the fact that Tony couldn’t see it. “Toomes got out. Some guy with a Rhino suit also showed up, and Peter kicked his ass. He’s already on his way back to containment.”

“And Toomes?”

“Dead. Extremely so. Along with the Hydra squad that came after us.”

It was silent for a moment. “Damn, Jackson. You’ve been busy.”

Percy hummed in agreement. “We’re almost here. Peter will call you when he gets inside, won’t you, Peter?” The boy nodded vigorously.

Tony sighed again. “Stay safe.”

“You too.”

And with that, Percy went to call Lee. Her voicemail, as always, had been succinct. “Call me back. ASAP.”

He frowned. He’d never heard her sound that stressed out, the tension clearly laying under her normally calm tone. That’s when he saw it. It was dated about fifteen minutes ago—the Hydra agents had, indeed, blocked all phones, including any notifications Percy might’ve gotten. Apparently, the lockdown had been overridden, and somebody had opened the front doors of the Hub.

Something cold settled in his stomach.

The hospital wasn't too far from the apartment, and he was in the garage sub-level in no time. Just as he was about to call her back, he heard the voices. Percy's brow furrowed, and he stepped out of the parked car, tensed up for a fight.

Against all common sense, he walked towards the commotion. A second later, he recognized one of the voices as Lee's.

Dan was in a wheelchair with Lee's laptop, typing furiously. She was sprinting as she pushed him along, practically drifting around corners. As he worked, Dan was continuously screaming at her to go faster.

Behind them, Percy counted two doctors, three nurses, and a small herd of security chasing after them. "Stop them—" One of the doctors was yelling desperately. Dan cackled.

As soon as Lee caught a glimpse of Percy, she was digging around in her pocket, steering Dan's chair with the other hand. She chucked a pair of keys across the garage with startling accuracy. Percy's hand shot out and caught them before he even realized what was happening. "Start the car!" She screamed.

Dan's keys had a small collection of keychains on them, but he only felt a car key and a few regular ones. Lee's keys, then. She drove a giant pickup, and Percy frantically felt around for one, identifying the only one heavy enough to be a truck a few parking spaces away from him.

He pressed the unlock button, and the car responded with a click and a beep. Lee and Dan skidded to a stop, and she wrenched open the driver's side door. "Get him in!" She yelled, pulling herself up to the seat. Percy didn't even question it, grabbing Dan around the middle and depositing him in the backseat. Percy then kicked the wheelchair away and hopped into the passenger seat.

"Stop!" One of the security officers yelled. "This isn't legal—"

"WE ARE THE LAW!" Dan, Percy, and Lee all screamed at once as she put the car in reverse, speeding out of the spot, tires squealing.

She swerved out of the garage into traffic, breathing labored.

Percy wordlessly turned over his shoulder to Dan, an eyebrow raised. "Explain."

Dan gives him a wild grin, his hair tousled and cheeks pink. “Lee broke me out. A doctor tried to stop her, talking about how she wasn’t authorized to just snatch me, as if I clearly wasn’t enjoying myself, and she screamed “I’ll authorize your face!” And then she punched him in the nose.”

Percy had never been more confident in his hiring decisions. Then, “Alright. Good problem solving, I guess.”

From the driver’s seat, Lee snorted.

Dan beamed.

Their light-hearted attitude didn’t last long. “Someone’s in the building.” Lee said, her eyes deliberately focused on the road. She was white knuckling the steering wheel.

Percy sighed, and in an uncharacteristic display of emotion, he ran a hand through his hair, tugging at the dark locks. He was tired, both emotionally and physically. His dreams had gotten worse as of late, building up to something that he knew had already begun. His entire body ached from holding up the building, and he was running on little to no sleep. “I know,” He said. “I just found out. My phone had been jammed.”

That got him two sets of raised brows, but neither Lee nor Dan asked where he was that blocked his phone signal. “I only got to the security cameras a second before they were shut down. At least ten people, heavy boots, dark pants.”

Percy closed his eyes and leaned back against the headrest. “Combat boots? Gloves? Helmets with masks—like respirator looking things?”

Dan blinked. “Uh, yeah. How’d you know?”

“Because I just had a run-in with a dozen of ‘em before I got to you guys. It’s Hydra.” He said. Dan went abruptly pale, and Lee’s grip on the steering wheel got even tighter. Slowly, her foot pressed down further on the gas pedal.

They drove in silence, after that.

Ross woke up somewhere in the basement.

He'd only been there a couple times—there wasn't much down there. A small storage closet with furniture they didn't use, a store room for old files, and the boiler room. And based off the pipes his hands were cuffed around, they were in the latter of those three.

It was dark, and everything felt a little fuzzy. His mouth was dry, like it'd been stuffed full of cotton. Ross squinted, trying to get his bearings. His head ached, likely from falling right onto the hardwood floor. Other than that, he seemed fine, which was surprising.

"Ross?" Came a whisper to his left. He reflexively tensed a little before registering the voice as Bridgette's. "You awake?"

"Yeah," He replied hoarsely. "Yeah, I'm awake. What happened?"

"They knocked us out. I...I haven't heard from Dan and Lee. Or Jackson." Her normally soft voice was even more subdued, barely audible. Ross swallowed. He wasn't sure what was better—Dan and Lee coming here to help them, or staying the hell away from this place.

His eyes were slowly adjusting to the darkness, and he made out the forms of Mal and Aspen, both still unconscious and propped up against the wall, their hands similarly bound.

Suddenly, Ross felt like crying. Tears pricked at his eyes, and he tried to wipe them away, only for his wrists to be jerked back by the cuffs, a few inches away from his face. Frustration swept through him, and he curled his knees up to his chest.

"We're gonna be alright." Bridgette whispered. But she sounded more like she was trying to convince herself that, rather than him. "We're going to be fine."

Ross nodded, though he doubted she could see him.

They didn't speak again, not even as Mal and Aspen slowly awoke, squinty eyed and bleary. Despite the warm August weather outside, it was cold in the boiler room. Ross found himself shivering a little, skin dotted with goosebumps.

He was just starting to wonder how long they were going to be left here when he heard the heavy footsteps above them. Ross tracked them with his ears as they walked around their building, finally making it to the stairs. It wasn't anybody they knew—not Dan's slight shuffle, Lee's even stride, or Jackson's surprisingly soundless steps.

When the door opened, everybody tensed up and shied away from the sudden influx of light. The man that stood there was dressed in all black; a jacket that zipped up to his throat, tactical pants, and heavy, thick boots. A skull with eight long, spindly limbs curling around a circle was proudly emblazoned on his breast. There was a gun at his waist, and a mask on his face.

"Stand." He ordered.

Nobody complied.

His hand drifted to his weapon. "I said stand."

Ross and Bridgette exchanged looks, then carefully got to their feet, coaxing their cuffs up the vertical pipes they were locked to.

The Hydra agent languidly stepped further into the room. "Your other members." He said, moving closer until he was practically toe to toe with Ross. It looked like a gas mask, of sort, which made something hard stick in the back of Ross's throat. "Where are they?"

His eyes were a flat brown color. Not like Mal's rich dark-roast coffee ones, or Bridgette's sparkling tawny. Ross didn't know eyes could seem cruel, but this man's somehow did. Ross held eye contact for a moment, then jerked his head to the side, his jaw set in a clear answer.

The agent's eyes narrowed. He turned to Mal, who's chin was similarly tilted up in defiance. Then, he moved to Bridgette, who was curled into herself, looking down at the ground. The room was cold, but she was the only one outwardly shivering. She'd always hated the cold.

He stopped a precious two feet away from her. Then, to Ross's horror, he stuck two fingers under her chin and tipped it up towards him. As soon as his gloved hands touched her skin, Bridgette went stiff as a board. The Hydra agent was leaning into her space, eyes dark. "Tell me where your friends are."

She said nothing.

The man sounded almost amused, like this was all a game for him. "Such disobedience." He tutted. "What would your boss say?"

And Bridgette, sweet, sweet Bridgette, snarled. "He'd tell you to get fucked," She spat at him, and the glob hit him right in the left eye.

It went silent. Aspen was gaping, eyes wide and horrified. Mal, on the other hand, looked distinctly proud, her grin glinting in the low lighting.

The Hydra agent slowly righted himself, leaning out of Bridgette's space, and wiped his eye with a gloved finger. His hand was curling around his gun, and, for a second, Ross thought he was about to watch his friend die right in front of him.

Aspen made a choked off noise, still staring at Bridgette. The two of them were chained to the opposite wall, their view of their teammates slightly blocked by the agent.

Then, oddly enough, the agent's hand fell to his side. He turned on his heel and stalked out of the room, slamming the door shut behind him. A collective sigh of relief was let out, and Aspen leaned their head back against the wall, eyes squeezing shut.

Mal gave Bridgette a nod. "I didn't think you had that in you," She said. "Badass, Lehey."

Bridgette's ears went red. "We all thought about it."

"Yeah, but you actually did it. Spat in a Nazi's eye. That's on my bucket list, you know. Mind if I live vicariously through you and cross it off?"

This time, she laughed, and Ross found himself smiling as well. “No, Mal, I don’t mind.”

Ross tried to keep up with their conversation as it went on, but he found himself drifting away. They were sitting chained up in their boiler room, and Ross had definitely heard that door lock when the Hydra agent had stormed out. The agents were looking for Dan and Lee, and most definitely Jackson. Even if Hydra didn’t find them, there was no telling when they’d be back to the Hub.

It was freezing cold down here, and Ross’s arms were starting to hurt from the awkward position.

Then, he gasped. “Oh, my God.”

The conversations immediately came to a halt. “What?” Mal asked frantically. “What is it?”

Ross slowly turned his head towards her. Horror, ice cold and sharp, washed over him. “Barnes isn’t down here.”

Chapter End Notes

the acdec kids now absolutely believe that tony stark has created a bunch of avenger robots to take over the government so he can become a shadow ruler

dan and lee chaos duo dan and lee chaos duo

everyone: lee is so put together

lee as soon as she’s alone with dan: ILL PUNCH A DOCTOR

bridgette is a bad bitch, you heard it here folks. it’s always the nice ones that snap.

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Aspen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tuesday, August 14th

2:29 PM

New York, New York

Lee was a fantastic driver. In all the years Dan had known her, they'd driven lots of places together. And not once had he ever watched her speed, run a red light, or break a single traffic law.

Right now, he'd place her as going twenty miles over the limit, and she was taking corners like a maniac. Surprisingly, he wasn't the least bit scared. His seatbelt had locked up a while ago, so he wasn't really concerned about flying out of the car. Also surprisingly, Jackson hadn't said a word about how absurdly fast they were going. He wasn't even holding onto the handle on the ceiling of Lee's truck.

She practically drifted around the curb into the parking lot. There were only two cars—Mal's Volkswagen Beetle, and Ross's hatchback. Which wasn't unusual—Dan's car hadn't been there since the Council hearing, Bridgette and Lee came into work in her truck together, and Aspen took the subway. They weren't quite sure how Jackson got to work every day, but that wasn't important at the moment.

As soon as Jackson's foot hit the ground, his brow furrowed. "There's nobody inside." He remarked with a deep frown. Then he tilted his head, brow furrowing, like he was concentrating. In the meantime, Lee walked around to the other side of the car and helped Dan out. His legs were still relatively weak, and he stumbled as he stepped out. Wordlessly, Lee bent down and hefted him onto her back. He rested his chin on her shoulder. There were upsides to having your best friend being a giant Nordic lady who didn't mind giving piggy-back rides.

(They'd won the annual SHIELD Academy three-legged race every year they participated. Lee had just hefted him over her shoulder and booked it across the field. It was fantastic.)

Jackson made his way to the front doors cautiously, his shoulders tense. His hand rested on the heavy wooden doors. "Unlocked." He said softly. Dan frowned. Jackson pushed it open, and the cool air hit them in a wave.

He led the way, steps careful and light. To Dan's surprise, there was a wheelchair waiting against the wall, which Jackson grabbed and dragged over. He was able to take the few steps to get to it, as well as push himself along, to his delight. Lee walked beside him, her eyes roving across the hallways. Her hand was, once again, on her gun.

The bullpen was exactly as he remembered it. He'd only been out for a little over a week, but he'd, for some reason, expected it to look different. But Mal's collection of cacti and ferns were as green as ever, Lee's desk still organized with laser precision, Bridgette's collection of colorful pens still scattered across her desk. Aspen's headphones were by their computer, and even the soda can pyramid he'd built with Ross before he'd been hospitalized was still up.

Suddenly, Dan felt a little choked up.

But as he rolled down the ramp into the bullpen, he noticed a few things. Their chairs were shoved away from their desks, like they'd gotten up quickly and hadn't pushed them back into their spots. Bridgette's mug was knocked over. A few papers were scattered around Mal's cubby.

It didn't look like much of a fight had occurred, and he wasn't sure whether he was thankful or not.

Lee drifted towards Bridgette's desk, and gently picked up her mug. She stared down at it, running her thumb absently across the smooth ceramic handle.

Jackson's head suddenly shot up. "They're still in the building." He announced. "I—They're somewhere in here." Based on the tone, Dan assumed he meant their friends, and not Hydra. Lee carefully set Bridgette's mug down, and then she was off like a shot, climbing the steps out of the bullpen three at a time. Dan rolled himself up the ramp after her, and together, they searched through the halls, guided by Jackson's occasional mutterings and head-tilts.

They were nearing Dan's computer room at the end of the hall when Jackson stopped. "I can hear Mal." His head turned to the side. "This way."

"Mal!" Dan yelled. "Bridgette, Aspen, Ross!"

It took a second, and the reply was faint, but *there*. "Down here! We're down here!"

They stopped directly in front of the door to the basement. Jackson jiggled the handle, only to find it locked. He didn't even hesitate to throw his shoulder into it, busting it open with a *bang*. It was pitch black at the bottom of the stairs, and Lee gave his shoulder a quick squeeze before hurrying down after their team leader.

Dan sighed. The basement didn't have a ramp that led down, just a pair of thin, steep stairs. He could hear their teammates' voices, though, and he was content to just let them wash over him for a moment while Lee and Jackson went down to get them.

Jackson, Mal thought, looked furious. His brow was deeply knitted, and his lips were pulled back into a snarl. Her boss was a scary guy, Mal knew, but never had she actually wanted to shrink back from him.

Barnes hadn't come down with Lee and Jackson, and she didn't think he was up at the top with Dan. She lowered her head, a thousand apologies on her lips. She couldn't see Aspen, but Bridgette and Ross looked similarly teary eyed and scared.

He walked to her, first, while Lee went to the opposite wall. Jackson stopped a few feet in front of her, his eyes dark. Mal squeezed her eyes shut, shame and failure sweeping over her.

"They handcuffed you to the pipes?"

Mal opened her mouth, a teary explanation ready to spill out. It got caught in her throat. "What?"

His voice was low and furious in a way she'd never heard. "They cuffed you," Jackson said slowly, "To the Godsdamned pipes?"

Oh.

Oh.

"Yeah." She said. "Tranqed us. We woke up down here."

Jackson *was* pissed. Beyond it, actually, but it didn't seem to be aimed at them. He stepped

forward and, gentle despite his demeanor, ran a warm, calloused hand over Mal's cuffed wrists. They were tight, pressing into her skin, and his face darkened even further. He traced over the metal, fingers grabbing ahold of the metal links that tied her to the thick pipe, and snapped it in half.

Her mouth fell agape. Jackson paid her no mind, his fingers digging into the cuffs themselves. They, too, crumpled under his hands. Mal rubbed her newly free wrists, tender and sore. "Thanks," She said weakly. His smile was...well, it was soft. Sad, but soft in a way that made her relax a little. Jackson seemed to have that effect on them.

Aspen, Bridgette, and Ross all got similar treatments, leaving them all poking at their reddened skin. Aspen's eyes, wide and unsure, hadn't left Jackson. The display of strength had come from nowhere, but was so casual it left Mal wondering.

Everyone trudged upstairs, to see Dan waiting for them. His smile was wide and incredibly relived, and they all took turns leaning down to give him a tight hug. Mal stayed by his side, and he frowned slightly at the rapidly darkening marks around her wrists. Bridgette was glued to Lee, her smaller frame practically engulfed by their second-in-command. It was almost comical—Bridgette barely went up to Lee's armpit. They were holding onto each other like their lives depended on it, and Mal saw a rare flicker of raw emotion on Lee's face.

She looked away. In silence, they all trudged to the bullpen. Mal's focus was glued to the ground.

"Barnes...he's gone, isn't he?" She blurted.

Jackson's face shuttered. "Yeah," He said quietly. "I...I couldn't find him anywhere." His face was composed, as usual, but now, she could see something raw slipping through the cracks.

She rubbed at her eyes. "I'm sorry," She whispered. "I'm so sorry."

Jackson shook his head. "It's not your fault."

But it *was*. Barnes had been taken from them so easily; they hadn't even been able to put up a fight. They'd been tranqed and stuffed in the basement while the one man they were supposed to keep safe was taken, from their own goddamn building.

They stopped in the middle of the bullpen, forming a loose circle. All eyes were on Jackson, who had a strange, faraway look on his face.

Jackson leaned back against a desk—Lee’s, the very same one Barnes had been sitting at just a bit ago. “I think,” He said softly, “It’s time we had a talk.”

Everybody straightened, giving him their full attention.

“I’ve been blind since I was seventeen.” He started. “Ever since then, I’ve used my abilities to make up for it. I feel movement on the ground—vibrations. My hearing is enhanced, and I have a fantastic sense of smell.” Mal’s eyes slowly widened. Jackson had been open about the fact that he was Enhanced, but they’d never asked how—and he’d never explained. It seemed, now, something was changing. “But, mostly,” Jackson said, words slow and careful, “I use the fact that I can feel people.”

“Feel...people?” Mal repeated.

“Their footsteps, their organs and bones, the blood that runs through their veins.” He looked up. “Their heartbeats.”

Mal and Ross exchanged looks, and Bridgette’s grip on Lee’s forearm tightened slightly. There was nothing but honesty in Jackson’s voice, but an air of unease fell over them nonetheless. It wasn’t Jackson’s abilities that bothered her. She just felt there was something *wrong*, more than they already knew. Like they were skirting on the boundary of something, something *bad*.

Jackson...Jackson looked sad. Not just sad, but absolutely devastated. His shoulders were slumped, his head bowed. “I know a lot about Hydra.” He said. “They don’t take prisoners, and they sure as Hell don’t leave them.”

Barnes would have told him that, Mal recognized. Because Hydra didn’t take prisoners—they took *recruits*. And that agent, down in the boiler room, had just turned and left them there.

Jackson’s hands tightened on the edge of the desk. “Why’d you do it?”

Lee and Bridgette’s brows furrowed in unison. Ross’s voice was hoarse. “What?”

“When Lee and I got down there,” Jackson said softly. “To uncuff you guys, everybody relaxed. But not you. Your heartbeat sped up. Before I broke the cuffs. You saw me and Lee, and you were scared.” A pause. “Guilty.” He corrected.

Mal’s mouth fell open. She looked first to Dan, who was looking confused as she was. Then to Bridgette, the wet shine in her eyes. Lee, who was inscrutable as usual, save for a deep frown. Ross, who’s eyes were flickering from Jackson to the group.

And Aspen, whose face was blank. Perfectly, uncharacteristically blank.

Mal watched, transfixed, as everyone slowly turned to Aspen. The realization unfolding upon each of their faces, the dawning realization.

“The men I saw,” Dan whispered, sounding wrecked. “They were only in the entrance hallway. But the cameras turned off, and they hadn’t even made it into the server room yet.”

Ross looked up. “The lockdown override.” He said. “It’s...it’s possible to add in a new key. Through the building’s mainframe. Which can only be unlocked by the building’s server administrator’s thumbprint and retinal scan. The server administrator, who,” His voice dropped. “Has been unconscious in a hospital for the past week.”

Bridgette, next. “I stopped by the Hub to drop off paperwork. You—” She broke off. “You were *there!* I, I thought you’d been stressed out and were looking for something to do, and that’s why you were acting weird! I left, and then a few hours later Lee came by and found a fucking head on our table!” She screamed.

Aspen took a step back.

Finally, it came to Mal. “When Barnes was giving testimony,” She breathed. “I was checking on all of you—I—I knew where Lee was, where Bridgette was, where Ross was, where Dan was, and I knew, I *knew*, that you were somewhere guarding the roof entrance, and that you’d be off camera.”

It was silent. Aspen’s eyes were wide, shoulders drawn up defensively, and they took another step back. Jackson’s face was hard, but she could see the tightness of his jaw was to hold back a tremble in his lower lip.

Then, Lee exploded. “*You fucking piece of shit!*” She roared, and let go of Bridgette to launch herself across the loose circle they had formed, crashing into Aspen and sending them both to the floor. The crack of her fist slamming against their cheek echoed sharply, and it took a few seconds for Mal to lurch forward. “Lee, Lee stop!” She yelled, but her teammate paid her no mind, landing another punch square on Aspen’s nose. This time, the *crunch* wasn’t just the sound of flesh and bone smacking together. Aspen writhed and struggled, but Lee was practically twice their size, and it was pathetically easy for Lee to pin them.

“Van Keppel!” Jackson barked. It was with his voice that Lee, after giving Aspen another foul look, let go. Her knuckles were a raw, bloody mess, but that was nothing compared to Aspen’s face. Blood was pouring down their upper lip, and Mal could already see the red marks on their face that would surely bruise, deep and ugly.

Good, she thought viciously.

Bridgette’s hand, neatly manicured and clean, intertwined with Lee’s rough, bloody ones. Their sweetest member looked oddly satisfied, staring down at Aspen.

Lee was far from finished, though. There was a wild look in her eyes, wrecked in a way Mal had never seen. She flung a hand out at Dan, who was white as a sheet. “*You did this!*” Lee shouted. “He almost *died*, almost bled out all *alone*, you worthless son of a bitch!”

It took a second, but Mal got it. If Aspen looked the other way, let Hodgins in to kill Barnes, then that means they were also involved in attacking Dan in the monitor room so he couldn’t alert the others.

Mal had a rough life, growing up. Poor as dirt, her mom drifting in and out of her life. She didn’t have many friends—kids were a special type of cruel, the kind where even they don’t quite understand why they say the things they do. Mal grew up biting her tongue and clenching her fists, digging her bitten nails into the flesh of her palms. She grew up stumbling to her feet, dusting dirt off her clothes, wiping blood from her nose and split lips. Mal grew up angry.

But never once, had she ever felt like she did now.

Never once had she been so full of rage that it left her shaking, her ears ringing and red tingeing her vision. Never once had it *hurt* like this, like she’d taken a blow to the gut, the wind knocked out of her and leaving her on her back gasping for breath.

“What did they offer you?” Jackson asked. He didn’t seem angry. Just broken. “Money? Power? What did it take, Anev?”

Aspen squeezed their eyes shut. “I did it to save you—all of you.”

“No,” Dan whispered, eyes shining with betrayal. “You did it because you’re a *coward*, Anev. Because you’re pathetic.” Aspen stumbled back. They had *never*, not even once, called each other by their last names—excluding Jackson, that was. “You don’t even have the decency to tell us the truth, even now.”

“I’m...I’m sorry,” Aspen—no, *Anev*, choked out.

Jackson slowly straightened, abandoning the desk he was leaning on. He shook his head. “Yeah,” He said, voice frigid. “I can tell when people are lying, too.”

He didn’t even have to ask before Lee was pulling out a pair of cuffs and yanking Anev’s arms behind their back. The *click* of them locking shut around their wrist was like a gunshot, with how she flinched as Lee led them away.

Mal watched as Jackson made an aborted noise that almost— *almost*— sounded like a sob. Her heart clenched. The man took a few grounding breaths, then went in the direction Lee took Aspen. The holding cells.

Her knees gave out from under her, and Mal sobbed.

Percy had been through a lot of pain.

The burning of the Pit Scorpion’s venom, the trembling muscles and breathlessness while he held up the sky. The feeling of his own flesh melting while Mt. St. Helens erupted around him, and agony of each and every nerve while he was submerged in the Styx.

A lot of things in Percy's life had hurt.

Nothing more than staring up at Luke Castellan in the forest, twelve years old, tiny and so, so trusting. Seeing demigods he knew raise their swords in defense of the Titan Lord, Clarisse turning her back on the rest of Camp as the Ares cabin stayed. That terrible sting, watching the Argo 2 fire on New Rome.

Nothing hurt like watching someone you knew, someone you loved, turn their back on you.

Percy's fatal flaw had always been loyalty. To him, it was inconceivable to betray the people who loved you. To be a double agent, to switch sides. It was never something Percy was capable of, and sometimes he forgot that other people didn't feel the same.

Anev was cuffed to a table, bolted down to the floor along with the chair. Lee's eyes were cold as she locked the cuffs, but her hands were shaking.

Percy put a gentle hand on her shoulder, and nodded towards the door. "Take a minute," He said, quiet enough for only her to hear. The rest of the team had followed them, eventually. Mal and Bridgette were supporting each other, and Percy could hear the sobs wracking them. Hot tears hit the carpet, leaving dark splotches on the synthetic fibers. Every one made him want to flinch.

Lee's voice was a soft murmur on the other side of the wall, Bridgette's tears muffled against her collar and Dan's grip tight on her free hand. Percy figured he'd give them a moment before calling them into the interrogation room. They deserved that much, at least.

He dragged the opposite chair out, the metal scraping against the concrete floor. Anev's eyes didn't leave their own folded hands. Not a tear escaped their eyes.

"What did they give you?" He repeated his question from earlier, voice rough and hoarse.

Anev shook their head.

Percy slammed a hand onto the tabletop, and they flinched. "*Answer me!*"

They rubbed a hand across their eyes.

“How much were we worth? A couple thousand? Was that your price?” He pressed. Anev’s shoulders drew in further. His face curled. “You’re disgusting.” He snapped, standing up in a smooth motion and stalking towards the door.

“They didn’t pay me.” Anev’s voice was barely audible.

Percy stilled with one hand on the doorknob. “What?”

“I—I made a deal.” They whispered. “That...if I helped them, they’d leave everyone alone. I did it to protect them.”

He closed his eyes. “To protect them?” He repeated. Percy twisted the knob, and stepped aside, letting the team trickle in to stand against the wall. As far from Anev as they could get. The ex-agent looked up, eyes wide.

“Do they look *protected*?” Percy asked, voice dripping with barely-concealed rage. “*Do they?*”

Anev took in Mal’s red nose and eyes, Bridgette’s shaking shoulders. Lee’s wet lashes, Ross’s drained face. Their eyes lingered on Dan, sitting in his wheelchair, eyes looking empty. He tilted his chin up and caught their gaze, staring back. Anev looked away.

“They’re going to turn James back into the Soldier. They’re going to take away his mind, twist and warp him back into the thing he feared the most. They’re going to make him kill again, and I’d bet my life that the people who you pretended to care about are at the top of the hit list.”

Anev paled. “W—what?”

Percy scoffed derisively. “What, did you honestly think they’d keep their end of the bargain? Gods, how stupid are you? You handed Hydra their best weapon back to them on a platter, and they’re going to use him to slaughter every single one of you like animals.”

James. Gods, *James*.

Ever since he'd walked into the building, felt four heartbeats in the basement, his four team members but not *him*, he'd felt like breaking down. He was glad beyond all measures that all the SWORD members were whole and alive, but couldn't get rid of the pang in his chest.

He'd *promised* James he would be alright. He'd sworn it.

Percy had failed him.

He hadn't seen Anev for what they were, and now his friend was paying the price.

His eyes stung. "You're a terrible person, Anev. He worked so hard to lose the Soldier. He fought for himself for *months*, survived decades of torture. He trusted us. And you betrayed that." He shook his head. "How...how could you *do* that?" His tone was far more pleading than he would've liked. Desperate.

Anev shook their head quickly. "No—that's, they promised. Him for them."

"The fact that you made that trade is sickening." Dan said from behind Percy. "You gave that man to the people who tortured him for eighty years. I—I have permanent nerve damage, you know. There's wiring in my spine. I'll never be able to live my life like I used to, I can still barely walk. You did this. Nobody else." His voice was harsh in a way that it never was. "You did all this for *nothing*."

"Hydra's coming. Your deal means nothing to them." Lee added on stonily. "You betrayed all of us to try and save your own hide, you feed us a couple of bullshit lines about trying to save us, and...*what*? You think we'll just forgive you?" He demanded.

Anev met her eyes, their gaze imploring. "I didn't think..."

"Yeah," Bridgette said softly. "You didn't think."

"I made a mistake," They insisted, looking down. "I get that."

"No," Percy said. "You didn't make a mistake. You knew exactly what you were doing. I made the mistake when I let you on this team." He whispered, disgust and vitriol dripping from each word. "I messed up when I decided that you belonged here. That was the real mistake. *Trusting you.*"

For once, Anev seemed truly at a loss of words. Ross made a disgusted noise in the back of his throat. "You're not worth my time." He decided, before turning on his heel and stalking out of the room. Mal, after a second, followed. Then Bridgette and bloody-knuckled Lee. Dan stayed the longest. He didn't say anything—he just stared at Anev. That seemed to cut deeper than any words he could possibly say. Then, he, too, wheeled out of the room.

Percy put his palms down onto the tabletop, leaning over Anev. The set of their jaw was stubborn, though their eyes were shiny with tears. Percy knew it wasn't remorse—they weren't sorry for what they did. They were sorry everyone found out. "Where did they take James." It wasn't a question.

Anev tilted their face up to look at him. "I don't regret what I did. Any chance to keep them safe, I had to take."

To keep yourself safe, he wanted to correct. "At the expense of another man's life? Do you honestly think they wanted your protection when it came with a cost like *that*?"

Their face tightened. "Hydra never stops." They said flatly. "If it was us versus them, they would win. I was presented an opportunity and I took it. Wouldn't you do the same?"

Gods, it seemed so obvious, now. How could he not have seen it? Everything that had happened had pointed towards a mole, the involvement of one of his own. But Percy had just been so hopeful, so naive, in a way he'd thought long stomped out of him.

"No," He denied flatly. "No, I'd have faith in my team. I'd trust that we could get it done *together*. I'd take Hydra head-on, if I had to, instead of turning on them. You took the coward's way out. You didn't believe in your own friends. Don't compare the two of us."

They stared down at their hands. "You can't get him back." Anev said finally. "It's done."

Percy leaned in even further, his eyes dark and stormy. Anev shrunk back, trying to put some distance between the two of them. When he spoke, his voice was low, unfamiliar. "Anev, you'll find that you have *no* idea what I'm capable of."

BET YOU FUCKERS DIDNT SEE THAT COMING HUH

diversity win! the hydra traitor is nonbinary!

get you a bestie like lee who will just. pick you up.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY PERCY JACKSON

as a gift i bring him great emotional pain <3

also blease dont speed like lee

plumbing baby. goodbye.

A Bad Man

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tuesday, August 14th

3:53 PM

Stark Tower, New York

Barnes had been gone, by Tony's estimate, for one hour and forty-three minutes, and Percy was losing his goddamned mind.

As soon as Wilson had called about the bounty on Spider-Man, Tony had shoved every single spare thought in his mind away, focusing solely on taking the damn thing down. It was well encrypted—but not well enough. He and Friday had punched their way through a few firewalls and had it taken down. He'd started rifling through the server Wilson had sent to him, looking for anything else that even *remotely* mentioned his kid.

Tony had just started up the search for whoever had put up the bounty when Percy had called him.

A Hydra squad, Adrian Toomes, and a Rhino man(?), but Percy and Peter were safe, in a car, going home. Tony had deployed a few members of the Iron Legion as soon as the news about the Raft had hit, but he figured a couple more wouldn't hurt, especially now that Peter was in the building.

Percy had left his tracker on, and Tony watched over his friend as he stopped by the hospital two of the SWORD members were at, and then doubled back towards the Hub. The news was still playing somewhere upstairs, and FRIDAY was keeping an ear on it.

"Boss," She said. "It appears Midtown has collapsed."

He'd blinked, staring up at the ceiling. "What?"

"The top floor of Midtown High School has collapsed. Estimated about twenty minutes ago. The area is cordoned off and the cause is being looked into." Tony slowly shook his head, the information making something in his chest tighten. Percy and Peter had been in there, along with the kid's friends. Obviously, they'd made it out, but Tony wasn't sure whether he wanted to forget

all about this or demand every last detail.

Percy had called him about half an hour after he reached the hospital.

“It was Aspen.” Was all he said, sounding absolutely *devastated*.

“Anev?”

Percy sniffed over the line. “Yeah. They made a deal with Hydra. They—they sold Bucky out. He’s *gone*, Tony.”

Tony let loose a foul string of swears. “Where are you?”

“Locking up. Anev’s in a cell. I told everyone else to go home.” He croaked. “I—Tony, I promised him. I told him everything would be *alright*.”

Tony squeezed his eyes shut. “We’ll find him.” He swore. “Get here as fast as you can.”

Percy’s shown up ten minutes later, red-rimmed eyes and cheeks wet. Tony had pulled him into a hug, first thing. The demigod clung to him, muffling a few restrained sobs into his shoulder. Despite the comforting words he murmured to Percy, Tony was furious.

He cared for Percy far too much to let something like this stand. For Christ's sake, Percy was still practically a kid. He was only in his twenties, early ones at that. He didn’t deserve any of what had happened to him, much like Peter.

Tony had known Peter was too far down his path to turn around, but at least Tony could be there to guide him and pull him out when he got in over his head. He didn’t think anybody had been there to do that for Percy.

Sally Jackson was a wonderful, terrifying force of nature of a woman, but even she could only do so much against what was thrust upon Percy. Tony didn’t know the full story of what Percy had been through—when he had spoken of it, it was detached, of events and not his own experiences. But Tony could tell. Sometimes, when he thought nobody was looking, Percy got a look on his

face, one that Tony saw reflected in the mirror every day for months after Afghanistan.

Percy was family. People didn't mess with his family and come out of the other side unscathed.

For now, though, he could quell the apoplectic rage inside of him to look for Barnes. Once they found him, once they got him back, though, that would be a different story.

"If we don't find any leads soon," Percy's voice was still rough and hoarse, "I'm going back to Anev's cell with a pair of pliers." He said darkly.

A few weeks ago, hell, even a day ago, Tony would have been horrified. He'd only interacted with the young agent a few times—the main interaction being when they'd holed up in Stark Tower to look over paperwork. The SWORD team seemed so comfortable with each other. Happy.

Tony remembered the way he'd felt, like he couldn't breathe, like his world was crashing down, when Obie had stood over him, arc reactor in hand. Stane had, metaphorically and almost literally, torn out his heart. Tony had killed him not even an hour later, and hadn't felt a thing, but also everything all at once.

He understood what it was like to be betrayed. How he'd felt when Pepper was in danger, going to pay for his mistakes, his inability to see what was right in front of him. But now it was Percy and Barnes, and an armored suit wouldn't be able to stop it all.

A map of known Hydra bases was up on the wall, dozens of different pins stuck in it. They were trying desperately to narrow down where Barnes could have gone, or be going, but their luck seemed to be running out. Not that they seemed to have any in the first place.

FRIDAY had been running all her spare server power through every satellite, every security camera they could get their hands on. Constantly searching for any sign of Barnes or Hydra agents, to absolutely results.

He was just *gone*.

Tony had to assume the worst. That the Soldier was back, and they were dealing with a combatant with over eighty years of experience. They called him a ghost for a good reason. He was slipping through Tony's fingers like smoke, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Thunderbolt had called twice, and Tony had ignored both calls. The third time, though, he groaned and pulled out his phone. Percy was on the phone with Wilson once again, wearing a hole in the tile with his pacing, back and forth like a caged animal, and an agitated one at that.

A caged animal seemed like a fairly good comparison, actually. There was something wild in Percy's eyes, raw and frantic, that he'd never seen before. There was a storm waiting in Percy Jackson, and Tony hoped it didn't wash them all away.

His phone began to buzz once more. If he didn't pick up now, he knew Ross would just keep calling and *calling*, until he showed up at the Tower bellowing something about the Accords or Steve Rogers or something else Tony really couldn't deal with right now. He groaned, and swiped his thumb across the screen to accept the call.

Percy felt like tearing his hair out.

This feeling, the type of frantic fear, was all too familiar. When his mother went missing, and he trekked across the country to make it to the Underworld to find her. When Grover went missing, and Percy heard him cry out in his dreams. When Annabeth went over that cliff, and Percy had just watched. When Nico had found out about Bianca, and had disappeared in a flurry of emotions.

The aching worry in his chest was one that he knew well. It never got easier.

"Nobody's ever going to control you like that again," He had said. *"Never again."*

James's voice was soft, delicate in a way that was entirely new. *"Promise?"*

"I swear it," Percy said. *"With everything I have."*

Percy didn't break promises. His word was, sometimes, all he had. He never backed out on a promise. He had told James he would be safe. It had been his choice to leave him at the SWORD facility, and he'd been too *stupid* to see what was right in front of him. It had to have been a SWORD member that had betrayed them. Percy had just been so idyllic, so naive, that he'd ignored the logical side of himself.

And now James was paying the price for it.

He wondered, briefly, if this was what Annabeth felt like when he went missing. Everything, just like after the Titan War, had been going good. Too good. And now he was here, out of his mind with worry and guilt.

Wade was doing all he could, but not even he could scrounge up a detail or a lead on James's whereabouts. "I'm sorry, Perce." The mercenary said. "I'll keep looking."

"I appreciate it," Percy said on autopilot. "Thank you."

Wade hung up, and Percy slid his phone back into his pocket. He stood there, numb. The air conditioning, working overtime against the summer heat, blew onto the back of his neck, and he could hear it churning along smoothly somewhere high above the ceiling. It was so unlike what he was used to—Camp didn't have any sort of temperature controls; the weather was always perfect there. His apartment growing up was always characterized by the radiator and AC on its last legs, wheezing and spluttering. That, combined with the sounds of people yelling outside, sirens, and the television, which Gabe always forgot to turn off, leaving it on all night while he was passed out in his armchair, were the sounds that lulled Percy to sleep for years.

Percy had crossed a line, today. Probably multiple. He'd made a bad call and now James was gone. And what he had done to Toomes...

Percy hated using his abilities like that. He'd sworn he'd never do it again, laying in the hospital bed after everything in Ontario.

He used it to save James. It had made him retch and gag, the feeling of it too much, like he was laying in that red-brick building all over again. He'd been heaving and wheezing, but he hadn't regretted it.

He used it again to kill Toomes. That man had tried to kill Peter. Had made a deal with Hydra, gotten broken out of prison in exchange for helping them kill Spider-Man. He'd directed an armed squad into a *school*. Percy made a living of dealing with people like that. He'd given Toomes a taste of his own medicine. Percy hadn't regretted that, either.

He wrapped his arms around his torso, suddenly feeling quite cold. Before he was in view of Peter and his friends, he'd flicked the blood off of his skin with a single wave, but Percy was still wearing his sweater, the one with the hole burned into the back. Suddenly, he felt the overwhelming urge to change, to get out of the clothes that had previously stuck to his skin, sticky with blood.

He started the journey to his room mostly on autopilot. Across the labs, into the elevator, down the hall. He'd pull on a worn shirt and a hoodie, something soft that reminded him of home.

Percy wondered if James had considered the Tower home.

"I know, I know—" Tony was saying into the phone.

“Don’t bullshit me, Stark—” Another voice snapped.

He stopped, one foot still in the air.

“I haven’t, and still don’t know where Steve Rogers is. Stop harassing me about it.”

“I severely doubt that. You brag an awful lot about your smarts, but you can’t even find one man?”

The noise slowly filtered out, replaced by a low pitched buzzing. His own heart thudded under his skin. Without even thinking about it, Percy stepped through the doorway, face blank. Tony noticed him immediately, and upon taking in his expression, hung up, cutting off the enraged voice on the other line.

“Who was that?” Percy asked before Tony could speak.

The man blinked. “Secretary Ross.” He tilted his head to the side. “I suppose you two haven’t met in person.”

Percy robotically stepped forward, pulling out a seat and dropping down into it. “Thaddeus Ross.” He said.

Tony inched closer, concern lacing his voice. “Yeah...what about him?”

White noise still filled Percy’s ears, like static popping from a television. He knew Tony was staring at him with wide eyes, distress evident on his face. But Percy couldn’t bring himself to say anything other than, “I never forget a voice.”

“What?” Tony says, completely thrown off.

Suddenly, sitting doesn’t seem so appealing anymore. Percy lurches upwards and resumes his pacing, hands gripping his hair. “The—the dream I had. Last September. Before we went and found Rumlow. I told you about the dream I had.”

Recognition dawned on his face. “Yeah. You told me you could smell the maple syrup. It’s how we narrowed down between the potential locations.”

Percy nodded quickly. “And, and I said there were *two* people talking. Rumlow, and someone else. Older, wearing a suit. He was *there*, with Rumlow. That was him. It was Ross.”

Tony was stunned silent. Percy kept going. “It makes sense. Fuck, it all makes sense now. Back in Ontario, we cleared out that base. But not even a few weeks later, the place was up and running again. The National Guard was taking care of the place. Them, and *Ross*.”

The ambush. There had been only three survivors—two Guardsmen, and Thaddeus Ross. One of the guardsmen had passed away in the hospital a week later, and the second was still in a coma. Tony hadn’t thought much of it then—three survivors, and Ross hadn’t come out unscathed. But, looking back, those bandages and the sling had come off awful early. And Ross had lost the limp fairly soon, as well.

Tony’s hands slowly came to cover his gaping mouth. “Oh, God.” He breathed. “The Raft. Who would have been able to go in there, unquestioned? *Who would have access to top secret projects?*”

“Integrity.” Percy said numbly.

“He called me.” Tony blurted out. “Last week. He threatened Spider-Man. I thought it was weird at the time. But...” He shook his head. “It was a fucking *test*. And I fell for it. *I fell for it*.” He repeated. “If Peter was in trouble, he knew I’d be helping him.”

“And out of the way,” Percy concluded softly, “If he wanted to snatch somebody from right under our noses.”

Thaddeus Ross was Hydra.

Tony had never liked the guy—he doubted anybody did, really. But Tony never thought *this*. If they were right, not only had Ross helped take Barnes, but he’d used some bullshit government project as a cover for his money that was used for not only trying to kill Tony, Barnes, *and* freeing Toomes, but probably a million other things, too.

“Fri.” He got out.

“Already on it, Boss.” She promised. “I’ll turn his hard drive inside out, if I have to.”

Ross had put up an ad for Peter’s *head*. He’d gotten his identity from Toomes in exchange for his freedom, and put a bounty up on his kid, all as a fucking distraction for Tony. Ross sent a Hydra squad, Toomes, and some Rhino guy after a bunch of teenagers.

He’d had everything planned out.

Ross hadn’t accounted for Percy. Never had Tony been more grateful that Percy’s abilities weren’t widely known. If Percy hadn’t been able to do what he did, Peter, along with seven other teenagers, would be dead.

Tony felt sick.

The two of them stood there, stewing in silence, letting the revelation wash over them, until FRIDAY spoke up. “His firewalls are decimated, Boss.” She said primly. “I’m taking it upon myself to delete everything I find irrelevant.”

Tony couldn’t help the soft huff in amusement. “As you see fit, Fri.”

And it went quiet once more, and Tony returned to his planning of the grisly death of Thaddeus Ross. The man typically lived in DC, but he knew that he was in New York this week. It wouldn’t be hard to find him. Hell, Ross could be somewhere in Antarctica, and Tony would probably be able to find him.

They could find a new Secretary of State no problem. Tony had been holding off going full *shadow ruler* and pulling some strings to get him replaced out of the worry that somehow, the new guy would be worse. Now though, nothing was holding him back.

...He could make Rhodey do it. Rhodey would do a good job.

“Boss.” FRIDAY’s voice was hesitant. “You may want to take a look at this.”

He turned towards the screen she pulled up. A document was displayed on it. Then another. Then another, and another. By the time she finished, there were dozens of windows overlapping each other. Bank statements, emails, contracts...

One stood out. It, remarkably, looked like some sort of research paper. “I didn’t know Ross could read.” Tony mumbled as he grabbed onto the hologram and enlarged it. It was at least eight pages, and seemed to end abruptly. Tony scanned it, flicking through the pages.

C-4.

His breathing stuttered. Sure enough, it was just like Wilson described. Graphs and charts, lengthy paragraphs. Never Percy’s name. Just *Subject C-4*. It sickened him to think of how many other test subjects it had taken to get all the way down to C-4. The name was oddly suited to Percy, though.

Why on Earth did Ross have this?

He supposed it made sense, Hydra contacts and all, but...

“Fri, run a search. See if anybody else has this.” Wilson had delivered a nasty virus to the computer he’d found the report on—the file was now irreparably corrupted. But if Ross had it as well, it might have gotten shared out long before that.

“I cannot find any other documents that match this one, Boss. Would you like me to keep searching?”

Tony hesitated. “Table that, for now. Finding Barnes is more urgent. Thanks, Fri.”

“Any time.”

So, Ross didn’t like sharing. It made sense that he would want to keep the report to himself. The way it read, Subject C-4 was a weapon—a powerful one—but nothing more. If not for talks about biological properties, it was written so clinically you would have thought it was about an object.

“Jackson!” He called. “You might wanna hear this.”

Percy’s hands were shoved deep into his pockets. There weren’t many people out on the streets, most hiding away from the blazing sun overhead. His sneakers echoed on the pavement, rubber on concrete.

He’d changed out of his sweater, leaving him in the tee he’d been wearing underneath. It was old, softened by age, and a faded, a dark gray color. There was a loose thread at the sleeve, and he rolled it between his thumb and pointer finger as he turned the corner.

He knew he should be looking for James. But he just couldn’t let this go. If there was even the smallest chance...

Percy ascended the steps, keys in hand. The first thing he and his mother had done after moving was paint their door. Blue, of course, like the cookies and meals she made, a small defiance to Gabe. They painted their front door that exact same color—they didn’t need to make blue food, anymore.

He’d been ecstatic when they moved in. Their house smelled like warm spices and not cigarette smoke. His room, when he came home, was exactly as he left it, not full of Gabe’s trash. It was home.

Estelle was at a friend's house, having a sleepover. Which was probably for the best. She was only seven—she didn't even know about Percy's other life. All his mom had told her was that her older brother fought bad guys, sometimes. Enough to satisfy her, but vague enough to people assume he was some sort of cop, or something, if she told them. Estelle didn't even know everything that had happened to Lucas—just that he was living with them, now, and she needed to be gentle with him, because people were mean to him in the past.

Percy never wanted her to know about his other life. Maybe, one day, the fact that he was a demigod. She'd grow up eventually and wonder why his hair was black and not brown like Sally and Paul's, and where he got his unnaturally green eyes. He'd tell her about his father. Not about Tartarus. Not about the people he's killed.

Sally Jackson opened the door before he even knocked. The next thing he knew, her arms were around him. Percy automatically relaxed into her hug, even though he had to lean down to return it, these days. "I'm sorry, *amor*." She murmured into his ear.

"Lucas, sweetie!" She called as soon as she let go of him. The boy came running into the room and launched himself at Percy. He laughed, though it was short as he hefted the boy up. "*Hey, little brother.*" He said.

Lucas beamed up at him. "Hello!" He chirped in English. Percy's eyes crinkled. "*You're a fast learner,*" He praised. "*I can't stay long, but I need you to do me a favor. Can you do that?*"

His brother pouted a little, but nodded. Percy gave him an encouraging smile. "*I need you to look at a video of somebody, and tell me if you recognize him. That alright?*"

Another nod. Percy gently put him down onto the ground, and pulled out his phone. He crouched down, and pulled up the video. As soon as he unpaused it, he could hear Lucas's little heart speed up.

On the screen, Secretary Ross tapped his stack of papers against the podium. "Good morning, everyone." The man started with. "I know many of you, today, have questions about the group known as the Rogue Avengers. Currently, the United States Government considers this group, lead by Steven Grant Rogers, widely known as Captain America, as—"

Lucas stared. "*That...*" He swallowed. "*That man,*" The boy whispered.

Percy closed his eyes for a second, then turned to Lucas. "You recognize him?" He gently prodded. Lucas nodded. "*He was on the boat. He spoke to the men who took us.*"

That was enough. If Lucas's testimony placed Ross on the boat with him and all the other kids, the kids that *didn't make it*, it would be enough to get a warrant to look through Ross's computer. Which they had already done, sure, but nobody else needed to know that.

"*Thank you, Lucas. You've been a big help.*" He said sincerely.

Lucas's eyes were wide and imploring. "*He is a bad man, Percy.*"

He put a gentle hand on the boy's shoulder. "*I know. I'll take care of it.*"

Percy kissed his mom on the cheek, then walked out of the apartment, his mind racing. For some reason, he'd been hoping that he was wrong. That so many bad things could not be tied to one person—well, one person, and his own teammate. He'd been holding out on the fact that one

person couldn't be so *foul*.

Despite everything he'd seen, everything he'd done, Gods and men alike always disappointed him.

Chapter End Notes

me @ marvel, side-eyeing thaddeus ross: i see your shitty ross
me, holding ross bunmi: and i raise you my own, better ross

BABOOM, IM CONNECTING SHIT FROM THE FILE TOO

NOT JUST ANEV, BUT THADDEUS ROSS

kronk voice its all comin together

ross, so far, has:
been involved with everything anev was
helped kill johnson and all the other guardsmen in ontario
was behind project integrity and the two attempted assassinations
was involved in the raft breakout
tried to kill peter
has the report on percy

AND WAS INVOLVED IN THE TRAFFICKING FROM THE BEGINNING OF
THE FIC

also i forgot aunt may, lea, and peter were supposed to be at percy's house lmao. just.
pretend they're in another room or something idk

and just a warning: my beta straight up cried while reading the chapter that comes a
few after this one

plumbing baby. goodbye.

His Sins

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tuesday, August 14th

4:48 PM

Stark Tower, New York

Percy stalked out of the elevator like a storm rolling into town. His expression was dark, the ocean waves that made up his irises churning and frothing. Tony watched his fists clench and unclench with a furrowed brow.

“I was right.” Was all he said, words clipped and tone brusque, as he walked past Tony. He opened the door to his apartment with a rough hand and didn’t even close it behind him as he marched straight inside. Tony drifted after him, staying a few feet back.

He wasn’t at all surprised when Percy went straight for his closet and pulled out the duffel bag at the bottom. Tony leaned against the doorframe, a pinched look on his face. Percy’s movements were steady as he unzipped it and started pulling out all his gear. The pieces of his suit were neatly folded, armor laying on top.

He yanked his tee over his head and grabbed the underlayer of his suit; a thin, long-sleeved shirt that zipped up to his throat. It was made out of a thin kevlar blend Tony had developed early in his Iron Man career—It didn’t stand up against a point-blank shot, but most weapons glanced off of it.

Tony turned away as Percy pulled it on, neither of them speaking. Though he’d only seen him for a second, it was impossible to miss the multitude of scars. Tony blinked rapidly, trying to understand what he’d just seen.

Percy always wore layers. Long sleeves, flannels, jackets, sweaters. Once Tony had understood the fact that Percy simply didn’t overheat, no matter what he was wearing, he’d just assumed it was a stylistic choice. He liked layers and could wear them year-round. So why wouldn’t he?

He’d considered and accepted the fact that maybe it was to hide scars, as well. But he hadn’t pictured that many.

Some looked like they came from bladed weapons; stab wounds, both large and small, and long cuts wrapped around his skin. A few looked like they came from arrows or spears, some bullets. Shrapnel scars, Tony was intimately familiar with—he remembered that mission report, the one where Brock Rumlow tried to blow his friend sky high on a SHIELD mission.

That wasn't all.

Claws, teeth, burns, and even what looked like Lichtenberg figures, branching across his skin like the limbs of a tree. The most eye-catching one, though, was on his stomach, right below his belly button. Tony had never seen anything like it.

It was large, both in length and width, easily the biggest one. It was jagged and raised, still pink and raw-looking, though Tony knew it was at least a few years old. That wasn't the type of wound that scarred over—it was the type that killed people, demigod or not.

It was a terrible thing that wasn't even the worst part. Most terrible, by far, was the fact that some of the scars stretched and curved unnaturally, up his sides and across his back. Scars that grew with Percy. Tony didn't want to think about how young he had to be for them to look like that, what stage of childhood he was in when somebody hurt him badly enough for it to leave a permanent mark.

When he turned back around, Percy was methodically putting on the pieces of his armor, the thick braces around his wrists and the pads on his elbows and knees, the parts that covered his shoulder and torso. When he started lacing up his boots, Tony spoke up. "You're going to find him."

It wasn't a question. As soon as he saw Percy's face during that phone call, when he said the name *Thaddeus Ross*, eyes clouding over like the beginning of a storm, Tony knew the man would be dead by sunrise.

"Yes." Next out of the bag came his daggers, the throwing knives, the sword, and all the other weapons Percy carried on him. He buckled on the sheath on his back, sliding the sword into it like he was born to do it.

Yes, Thaddeus Ross was practically already dead. Tony knew Percy very, *very* well. He hadn't gone to see Lucas to gather evidence to convict the man. He'd gone to double check, to forge another weapon in his arsenal, to release it to the world long after Ross's body was cooled. He'd gone to Lucas to make sure everyone knew just what kind of man Ross was, so that when he reported it all, nobody would look him in the eyes and ask just where the Secretary of State had gone.

Percy hadn't gone with the intention to send Ross to jail. He'd gone to collect another one of Thaddeus Ross's sins, to send him somewhere far worse.

For Lucas. For all those kids that had died. For Peter and his friends. For Bucky. For Johnson.

Lastly, the demigod pulled out his helmet. The smooth metal that covered his face, leaving nothing but a blank visage and dark slits where his eyes should be. He turned to the doorway, halting when Tony stood in his way.

The silence was tense and measured. Then, Tony pushed himself off the doorframe. "He tried to mess with my kid." He said. "When do we leave?"

Tuesday, August 14th

4:48 PM

153 Bleecker Street, Greenwich Village, NY

Jackson had told them, with a soft, cracked voice, to go home. None of them had it in them to argue.

They'd all piled into Lee's truck, leaving behind Ross and Mal's cars in favor of staying together. Bridgette was up front with him, while Dan, Mal, and Ross crammed into the back together. The drive home was silent, as was the ascent to the apartment building, and it reminded that way as they all sat down.

Mal wasn't quite sure who's apartment it was—everything was orderly in a way that almost screamed military precision, which was telling of Lee. But then again, the soft lacey curtains and decorative pillows seemed like Bridgette. The strange knickknacks on the bookshelf were typical of Dan. The painting on the wall seemed like something Ross would buy.

Maybe they'd all just been growing around each other and had picked up a few parts of the people around them.

There was a book on the table. Mal remembered Aspen recommending that series to them all.

She flinched.

Mal stared at the book cover like it would change in front of her eyes, like it would tell her something. Like it would tell her *why*.

Why Aspen did it. Why they turned their back on the team.

Their voice rang clear in Mal's head. *If it was us versus them, they would win.*

"What did we do to make Aspen have so little faith in us?" She voiced aloud. Everyone jumped a little at her voice.

It seemed nobody had a satisfactory answer before Lee spoke up. "Nothing." He said flatly. "They did it to save their own skin, and tried to spin it like it was a favor to us." Lee's voice was hard and flinty, unwavering. It stung, but Mal couldn't disagree.

"How did we not see it?" Ross breathed out. "It makes so much sense, now."

Dan's face was tight, lines creased into his skin. Out of all of them, Mal felt the worst for him. He was the only one with the scars to show for Aspen's betrayal. "We'd hoped." Was all he said. "It blinded us."

And with that, they lapsed back into silence.

Tuesday, August 14th

7:23 PM

Interstate 684, New York

Driving was calming. Especially out on the highways, just long stretches of road with not much to focus on other than his own thoughts.

The sun was riding lower and lower on the horizon, bathing the sky in oranges and pinks, casting a soft glow across the road. As the road curved west, Thaddeus Ross shielded his eyes from its glow, focusing on the asphalt instead of the horizon.

He had the radio tuned to the '70s classics station, like always, and he tapped his fingers on the steering wheel along to the beat of the Elvis song that was playing. He liked times like these—just him, music, and the open road. Not having to deal with his staff or his increasingly irate ex-wife.

The Accords were a daily struggle, a constant tug-of-war between him, the World Security Council, and Tony Stark.

At first, he'd assumed the Council would back him on the legislation. He soon found out that wasn't always the case. After Rogers and his allies went rogue, people were on edge. He'd swooped in, a proposal at the ready. It was the perfect time for it to go over—a way to soothe their frazzled nerves.

But then Tony Stark got involved, started proposing amendments, and offering up counter-arguments to just about everything Thaddeus had to say. And, worst of all, people seemed to listen to him. They listened to Tony Stark, some rich guy who spent his life making weapons and thought it made him a hero, instead of Ross, a three-star general. It was outrageous, he thought.

When the ex-SHIELD agent, Jackson, went in front of the Council with a proposal, Ross had been intrigued. He had Councilman Graves test him, prodding here and there. But Jackson seemed steadfast, and Ross's interest had increased. Personally, Ross wasn't Graves's biggest fan—he thought the man was pompous and, quite honestly, annoying. So watching Jackson tilt his chin up and verbally abuse the man was quite satisfying.

The SWORD team was brilliant. It had rankled him, at first, when he realized they didn't answer to the United States Government, but to the WSC. He'd been placated when he realized just what an opportunity it was. The team operated under the WSC, just like he'd wanted the Avengers to. And, like the Avengers, he quickly started planning ways to put them under American jurisdiction.

The team was made up of young, brilliant minds. Perseus Jackson was perfect for Ross's purposes. He'd had bad experiences with SHIELD, and the Avengers by proxy. Ross had gotten ahold of his file—he'd spent months pulling bodies from the rubble after the Chitauri Invasion. And then, after that, he joined SHIELD, and his teammates tried to kill him. (Sure, they were Hydra—but Brock

Rumlow was dead, and Ross could easily pass off the murder attempt as the man going rogue. After all, it wasn't like Rumlow was around to contradict him.) He'd gotten shot thrice, because of Stark. It was like he was made for Ross's purposes.

The man was clearly strong. His dedication was unwavering, and he wasn't afraid to do what was necessary. It was a bit of a wrinkle that he defended Barnes the way he had, but that was just because it was his assignment. If not for Stark's influence on the man—and boy, did Ross feel bad for Jackson that he had to work so closely with the man—Jackson probably wouldn't have cared less about Barnes.

He was ripe for Hydra's recruiting. Young, a good leader, and a clear motive for abandoning the rubble of the Avengers and SHIELD.

Ross's luck had improved even further when Aspen Anev, one of Jackson's own, had stood in front of him and made a deal for the safety of themselves and their friends. With Barnes as the bargaining chip.

Hydra wanted to kill Barnes. Tried, when he gave testimony at the Council. Hodgins collapsing when he had was a freak accident—and terribly inconvenient. Hydra said Barnes was a loose end. But with Anev on his side, Ross had offered a better solution. Hydra could get their weapon back, and he had a mole. Slowly, Anev would plant seeds in the minds of their team members, until every single one of them was under Ross's thumb. Including Jackson.

The Soldier's last handler had died. Perhaps Jackson could take his spot. He seemed like he would be able to handle it—Barnes had seemed to trust him, at least a little, when he was giving testimony. They could use that.

If everything went his way, which it had been, the SWORD team—an international response team, made of *humans*, not mutant freaks and aliens, would be another one of Hydra's many heads. The Avengers would have no place in the world. And everything else would fall into place.

With the Asset back in their possession and the Avengers out of the picture, they would be unstoppable. Even more so if Ross's side project worked out. Finding mutant children with the abilities that were described in the report was difficult, but not impossible. It's not like anyone cared about the little roaches, anyways. They were practically begging to be lab rats, Ross thought. They were serving a higher purpose, anyhow. If one of them were lucky, they would be the successful trial of Project C-4.

Ross had had a long day. He'd made an appearance at the Raft—dreadful place, really,—and

bargained with Adrian Toomes. Finding out Spider-Man was a teenager was baffling, but not enough to make him change his plans. Then, he'd gone to find Aleksei Sytsevich, who resided in the opposite wing of the prison. The man's Enhancement was grotesque, and Ross had barely refrained from curling his lip as he spoke to the creature. But, in the end, he'd made an agreement.

They'd planted two explosives—one in the walls of the high school Parker went to, and the other inside the thick walls of the Raft. Toomes would lead Sytsevich and a Hydra squad into the school, kill Parker and his friends. Ross had an ad put up beforehand for Spider-Man's head, knowing it would distract Stark. The man's volatile reaction over the phone had made a bit more sense, now, knowing how young the menace was.

In less than a few hours, Barnes would be back in Hydra possession, Parker would be dead, and Anev would begin swaying their coworkers to Hydra. To Ross.

He'd fully back SWORD, form trust between him and Jackson. When the time was right, he'd induct him into Hydra, and eventually put him in charge of the Soldier. Personally, that's where Ross thought his allies had gone wrong last time—Barnes wasn't like the rest of the Enhanced. He'd been a man, once, like the rest of them. That gave him some goodwill. Once he was... *convinced* to rejoin Hydra, Ross would give him more freedom. Encourage him to socialize, especially with his handlers. That way it'd be easier to find out if he was going to defect again. The sense of familiarity, of *friendship*, maybe, would keep him from straying from Hydra. Another reason Jackson would be a good handler—from what Ross had heard of him, he was friendly and kind to those on his side.

They'd hunt down the Rogues, eliminate them and anyone assisting them.

It would be glorious. For the new world order, as Ross often called it.

It had been, and would continue to be, a lot of work, with a hefty price tag as well, but with the Integrity bank accounts behind him, he doubted it would be much of a problem.

His eyes glanced across the road, avoiding the glare of the sun. It was getting close to sunset, now—it'd be dark in the next few hours or so. Ross took the bend of the highway with practiced ease, his fingers still drumming on the steering wheel idly.

The curve was sharp, sharp enough to catch him by surprise when there was somebody standing in the middle of the road. He swerved to the side, slamming on his breaks. The figure, silhouetted by the sun, blurring their features, didn't even flinch. Even when Ross laid on his horn, the person didn't move from the middle of the road.

Ross, irate, opened the car door. “What the hell,” He mutters, holding a hand over his eyes to block the sun’s rays. When he gets no response, he steps out of his car and moves towards the person.

A few paces away from them, he realizes with startling clarity, that it’s Jackson. Ross had never seen him in his tactical gear before—it’s made of deep reds and blacks, zipped all the way up to his throat. Long pants and sleeves, gloves that expose his fingertips. The knuckles are plated. A few blades, strapped to his thighs, and there’s a sword on his back. He certainly strikes a figure, Ross thinks. Just what Hydra needs.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t find out?” The man says before Ross can get a word out.

...Well, that could mean many things. Perhaps that Ross was involved with Hydra? But Jackson was here—he had come and sought Ross out. Not immediately turned him into the Council. That was promising.

“Find out?” Ross repeats. It would be unwise to incriminate himself just yet.

“Hydra.” Was all Jackson said.

Ah, so he was right. Ross’s lips curve upwards. “You were just what I was hoping for.” He compliments. “Smarter than I expected, too. That’s a good thing.”

Here, Jackson stills. “Excuse me?”

“It’s just you, here, Commander. Anyone else would have alerted the Council immediately, exposed me. Not you.” He gives Jackson a knowing look. “I understand, don’t worry. You’ll do fine as one of us.”

Jackson’s eyes narrow ever so slightly. Then, he shrugs, and strides over to Ross, posture open and friendly. He joins the man in leaning against the hood of his car. “I was right, though, wasn’t I?”

Ross raises an eyebrow. “Well, that depends on what you know.” He counters. Yes, this is going exactly as he hoped it would. Jackson’s curious, clearly hesitant on turning Ross in. He’s not combative, rather easygoing.

“The Hydra base in Ontario, taking out the Guardsmen, the trafficking for the children with specific abilities, the attempted assassination of Stark and of Barnes, the Raft escape, the death of that Spider-Man vigilante, stealing Barnes.” Jackson easily lists off on his fingers, one by one, almost lazily.

Ah, so the Spider brat was dead, after all. Ross chuckles. “You certainly are smarter than you were given credit for.” He concedes. At Jackson’s raised eyebrow, Ross adds on, “I was one of the many involved, yes.”

The other man doesn’t seem satisfied. He cocks his head to the side, his eyes tightening slightly in a scrutinizing look. “No, I don’t think so.” He leans in conspiratorially, lips slightly twisted upwards. “You planned it.” Something shines in his eyes, dark and glittering. “Be honest with me, please. I’d like to know what kind of man I’m going to get involved with.”

Yes, yes, *yes*. He has Jackson right where he wants him. “I did.” He gives. So Jackson doesn’t know about Anev’s deal, yet. He would have brought it up by now. “You didn’t just come here to talk.”

Jackson dips his head in acknowledgment. “If I wanted to talk, I would’ve picked up a cellphone.” He agrees. He’s rather blunt—something Ross appreciates in a person. “I want out.”

“Out?” He repeats cautiously.

Jackson looks frustrated. “Of this,” He says, waving his hand. “All this shit. I’m tired of living my life at someone else’s beck and call. I’m tired of having to go in and save a bunch of Enhanced. I’m tired of being the good guy, of *pretending*.” His words rang true and honest.

And here it was, the moment of truth. “And what do you *want*, Commander? You have many options.”

The commander tips his head to the side. “I want,” He says slowly. “I want the Rogue Avengers dealt with. I want to stop having to look over my shoulder. I want to stop feeling powerless.” He says. Then, he looks up at Ross. “I want Hydra.”

Truth.

Ross smiles, for real this time. He offers his hand. “Welcome aboard, Commander Jackson. You’re going to do great things with us.”

“Yes,” Jackson agrees, gripping Ross’s hand and giving it a firm shake. “I am.”

Chapter End Notes

TONY COMING IN WITH THE PROTECTIVE FATHER VIBES we stan
iron dad

ross, thinking percy didnt call the council because he wants to join hydra: :)
percy, who didnt call the council because he didnt want any witnesses: :)

what a dumb bitch lmao

also ross: yeah barnes and jackson are clearly nothing more than associates. jackson
clearly doesnt care about him.

meanwhile percy having a slight breakdown and prepping to go on a murderous
rampage to get his bf back

also shoutout to anybody who noticed the address the SWORD members were at. yes
the house is literally next to the sanctum.

percy being a fake bitch is so funny to me

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Not Past Alaska

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tuesday, August 14th

7:23 PM

Interstate 684, New York

“Not your type of music, I take it?” Ross asks, glancing over at the passenger, a pop-soul song flowing from the radio. He has the air conditioner blasting, all the vents in the car working overtime to combat that heat that sticks around even as the sun departs.

Jackson looks over at him, then shrugs. “Before my time.” He agrees. “Not really my genre, anyways.” He’d been quiet most of the ride, sitting still and pensive. Another trait Ross appreciated—he’d never been one for conversation during long car rides.

It was strange to him how comfortable and relaxed Jackson seemed to be despite the armor and weapons he wore. It seemed like a second nature to him, to have the weight of a blade on his thigh, his hip, his back. Even the thick, bulky wrist braces that connected to his gloves had stayed on. Despite the AC on, the car was still quite warm—Ross’s suit jacket and gun holster had been tossed into the back seat long ago.

It showed dedication, Ross thought. Jackson seemed ready, for anything.

Ross hums. “I find people in our lines of work don’t enjoy something as simple as a good song as often as they should.”

That gets him a nod. “That, we can agree on.”

He continues down the highway, and Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrel sing on.

‘Cause baby, there ain’t no mountain high enough,

“So,” Jackson says over the quiet music. “What now?”

Ross grins. “Well, Commander, I have just the job for you.”

Ain't no valley low enough, ain't no river wide enough,

Jackson raises his eyebrows. “Do tell. And, please,” His smile is sharp. “Call me Percy. All my friends do.”

He nods. “A pleasure, Percy. I’ll stick with Ross, no offense.” He says, eyes crinkled with mirth. “I try to avoid going by Thaddeus.”

To keep me from getting to you, baby.

Percy laughs. “Understandable. My full name is Perseus.” Ross knew that, but chuckles anyways.

“What do you know about the Winter Soldier?” Ross asks. Like a dog with a bone, Percy straightens. Ross knew that would pull him in. “He was an assassin for Hydra. The best of the best. Tony Stark built a machine, something that would mess with his memories somehow. But then Barnes went missing—back to Hydra, you confirmed.”

Remember the day I set you free

“His handler, a man named Vasily Karpov, was killed by Helmut Zemo last June. We haven’t attempted to fill the position since, but now that we have regained the Asset...” Ross trails off.

Percy’s eyes are wide. “You,” He says haltingly. “You want me to be his handler?”

Ross waves a loose hand. “The program needs new blood.” He says. “I think you’re just the man we’ve been looking for, Jackson. What do you say?”

I told you, you could always count on me, girl

He takes a second to think it over—Ross probably would have been concerned if he hadn't. Then, "I'm going to need some details, first. The way he turns back into the Soldier, the..." Jackson pauses.

"Trigger words?" Ross supplements.

And from that day on I made a vow

Percy snaps his fingers. "Yes, those. Don't we need those to help him regain his identity?"

He's already using 'we'. Ross nods. "Smart man. Don't worry about it—we have a way of getting them. Once we do, you—and if you so choose, a team of yours—will be the only ones who are privy to the activation words." Percy said he was tired of feeling powerless. If he had any reservations about pledging his allegiance to Hydra, to Ross, that would surely erase it.

I'll be there when you want me, some way, some how

Another beat of silence from him, filled by the duet being sung on the radio. Then, Jackson, face determined, nodded. "You've got a deal, Ross."

The man smiles, keeping his eyes on the road as he speeds up. Truly, this could not have gone better. Now that the conversation has petered out, he adjusts the radio volume.

'Cause baby, there ain't no mountain high enough

He doesn't look over at the man in the passenger seat.

Ain't no valley low enough, ain't no river wide enough

Percy Jackson smiles, and leans back in the passenger seat.

To keep me from getting to you, baby.

Sometimes, it was just too easy.

Like Ross had said—people in their lines of work didn't often appreciate the little things in life. Percy hoped Ross enjoyed this song while it lasted; it would be one of the last ones he ever heard.

Ross took him up north, further and further until Percy knew they were skirting the Canadian border. A few hours they spent in relative silence, the greatest hits of the '70's cycling through on the radio.

A few hours in which Percy's resilience was put to the test. A few hours in which he was itching to make use of the knives on his thigh, his waist, the sword on his back. There was a water bottle in Ross's door. It was half full. Percy could drown him in it. He didn't need that much. He could probably get by on a couple tablespoons, if he had to.

Every time he unconsciously wrapped his hand around the hilt of a weapon, he shook himself out of it.

This was his best bet for finding James. Tony had been watching from afar as Percy met Ross on the road, and when he was distracted, had gotten a good look at the man's plates for FRIDAY to track. There was probably a satellite or two focused on the car, watching, waiting.

At first, he was planning on killing Ross right then and there. He'd torture a location out of him, if he had to. But then, Ross had opened his mouth, and Percy realized something.

For all Ross knew, he had no idea Percy was Enhanced. And when you took away the most obvious reason for Percy not wanting to join him, and if you ignored the fact that he wasn't a horrible person, from the right angle, it did, in fact, look like Percy could be a prime target for Hydra recruiting.

He saw an advantage, and he took it.

Oh, Ross was still absolutely going to die, don't get him wrong. But this way, he could squeeze a lot more information from the man before he dealt with him. He'd be walked right into a Hydra base, right to *James*, and there was no chance, this way, that alarms would be raised and he'd be moved before Percy could get to him.

Even though pretending made his skin crawl. Every time he agreed with Ross, pretending to be interesting, *admiring* of his work, he felt like hurling. Ross smiled at him, spoke to him like they were friends.

Percy supposed that would make it all the more satisfying when he killed him, though.

It was dark out when they came to a halt. Ross turned the car off, and stepped out. Percy followed his lead, boots crunching on the gravel they had parked on. The sun was barely a whisper on the horizon, dusk casting long shadows behind them. Despite the lack of sun, it was still warm out, humid and sticky. He could feel Ross sweating slightly in his button-up and slacks. He'd taken off his suit jacket in the car, and now, as they stood in the gravel, he unbuttoned his sleeves and began to roll them up to his elbows. Percy, still in his pieces of armor and protective underlayers, didn't move to do the same. Once you drank liquid fire, this type of heat was barely a blip on the radar.

They seemed to be at some sort of rail yard. He could feel the tracks embedded into the ground, long bars heading miles and miles in each direction. They crossed over each other in sharp corners and rounded angles, overlapping and twisting. A few train cars sat here and there, but only one actual train. It was long, at least two dozen compartments, and seemed to be full of cargo.

There weren't any other people on the ground; just him, Ross, and the distant heartbeat covered by the whirl or machinery hovering above them.

But other than Tony, it was just Percy and Ross.

Good.

Ross sighed, looking over the tracks. "It's been a damn struggle, movin' supplies, these days. We used to use planes, mostly. Few boats, here and there. But with everything that's happened recently, it's been getting harder and harder to sneak by unnoticed."

Percy made the appropriate sympathetic noises.

“We started using the railroads a bit back. It’s far more discreet.” He winks at Percy, and he feels like throwing up. “I apologize; this partnership was...sudden. Not unwelcome, of course, but sudden.” Ross explained. “It’ll take weeks for us to organize a plane that’ll get you to the base. If you want to get there fast, this is the way to go.”

Percy nods, trying to seem eager enough to be believable, but not overly excited. “I don’t mind.” He forces on a grin. “I’m not real picky. Better to start now rather than later, anyways.”

Ross laughs and claps him on the back. “Atta boy. Most of it’s cargo; supplies and the like. The ride will be almost twelve hours.”

He tries to picture that in his head, a map of North America, their location versus how far a train could get in twelve hours. If it’s one of the high-speed ones, which he suspects it is, he could be on the East Coast by sun-up. “Where am I getting off?”

“Line ends ‘bout a hundred fifty miles out of Anchorage. Not much but forest around there. Some of my people will be waiting for you—they’ll take you through the woods, to the base where the Asset is being held. Stay there for a bit, then you’ll all head down to Soldotna—little town, westwards, and three days later a container ship will be docked and waiting. It’ll take you out of the Gulf, across the Bering Sea, to some Russian town—*An-ad-yr*.” He pronounced it clumsily, like it was an American word.

“Анадырь?” Percy asks. Ross raises a brow. “You speak Russian? Handy.” He remarks.

Percy shrugs, like he’s trying to seem modest. “I’m passable.”

Ross nods. “This’ll be quite the journey, son. You sure you’re up for it?”

Don’t call me son, he wanted to scream. Christ, even his own *father* barely called him that. He stopped to consider Ross’s words. He knew Ross wouldn’t be coming onto the train with him—the Secretary of State couldn’t just go AWOL for twelve hours. Did he drag this out, get to James first before dealing with Ross?

“Everything’s set up?” He double checked.

Ross gave the affirmative. "Reception's a bit spotty, there, but the confirmation message just came through. They know you're coming."

Percy nodded, decision made. Then, he turned to Ross. "You've made yourself redundant, then."

A beat. "Excuse me?"

He unsheathed his sword, the cold steel glinting with the last rays of the sun. "I said, you've outlived your use."

Ross's eyes narrowed, and his voice went low. "I'd be careful, if I were you, kid. Don't get cocky. It won't get you anywhere good." And that, Percy notes, is definitely a threat. When he doesn't respond, Ross adds on, "And it's not like this will go unnoticed."

Percy grinned. "Oh, I'm counting on it." He swung, fast enough the blade sounded as it went through the air. The tip stopped a millimeter away from Ross's throat. "On your knees." Percy ordered.

The man was sending him a truly foul look. "Whatever little coup attempt this is, it won't work." Percy pressed the blade against his skin, and Ross slowly lowered to his knees, the gravel crunching under him.

"That's not what this is." Percy said. "You seemed to have severely misread the situation, Secretary."

"You'll get nothing from this." Ross growled.

"Oh, on the contrary. Satisfaction, for starters." Percy offered. His face sobers into a darker expression. "In Ontario. Those National Guardsmen. Captain Johnson. She's my friend. *Was* my friend."

Ross's heartbeat picks up. "Ah." He says, voice strangled. "You, of all people, Jackson, understand the sacrifices one must make. I am sorry that your friend was caught in the crossfire, though."

He dropped the *Percy*, he notes. That was fast.

Typically, Percy isn't one to drag out things like this—it's never worth it. The longer you wait to strike, the longer your enemies have to plan. Gods know he owes his life to monsters gloating over him, giving him time to scramble up a way to get himself out of the situation.

He's not here to brag, though. He just wants Ross to understand. To learn just where he went wrong.

Percy wants Ross to know why he's going to die.

And, besides, Percy thinks, it's not like the extra minute will do much for the man, anyways. His phone was in the cupholder in the center console of the car, and, and though he was carrying a gun, it sat in the backseat in its holster along with his discarded suit jacket. Without it, despite all the pain and bloodshed he had caused, Thaddeus Ross was just a man.

"You had Brock Rumlow try to kill Tony. I killed Rumlow." Percy says, next. "You wanted Adrian Toomes to kill Peter. I killed Toomes." Ross gapes at him. "You sent Nick Hodgins to kill James. I killed Hodgins."

He can practically hear the cogs whirring in his mind. To Ross's knowledge, Hodgins died of a stroke. Which...technically, he did. Percy knows *that* all too well. In a split second, though it'd felt like longer, he'd grabbed hold of Hodgins's arteries, and with a tug in his gut, they'd burst instantaneously. There were worse ways to go than a brain hemorrhage. It was merciful, compared to what Percy wanted to do.

"You have no idea what you're talking about."

Ah, the denial. "Oh, I do. I really, really do." He shrugs. "It's like you said. I'm smarter than people give me credit for."

Sweat beads on the man's forehead. Percy doesn't stop. "I know about Integrity. You had that guard killed, had Anev put his head on our conference room table." The man's heart skips a beat. "Yeah, I know about Anev too." Percy tacks on. "You're not as slick as you think you are. I *also* know you got your hands on something called Subject C-4. I know you connected it to the storm in Ontario last November. I know you saw that, all that death and destruction, and thought *profit*. You took those kids to try and recreate it, killed their families so you could get to them."

Here, Ross's eyes widened. "How...how did you...?"

Percy crouches down in front of Ross, keeping his blade leveled with his jugular. "I have a long list of your sins, Thaddeus Ross. It's time I collect."

The shock seems to have faded, replaced by anger. His face is red, spittle flying at his lips as he splutters. *There he is*, Percy thinks. *There's the man I've been looking for.*

"Betrayal stings, doesn't it?" Percy asks calmly.

"I had high hopes for you," Ross snarls. "I thought you would be prepared to make the hard choices, to get rid of the monsters in our society by *any* means necessary."

Percy laughs. Ross flinches. "I am." Percy says, deadly calm. "Oh, but I am. I've just decided I'm going to start," He presses the tip of the blade into his skin, drawing a bead of blood out. "With you."

The *clang* of heavy metal meeting gravel is surprisingly soft. Tony's landings have always been smooth and controlled, like the metal suit encasing him was just another part of his body.

Ross's eyes widened as he took in the iconic red and golden suit. Tony cast an intimidating silhouette—the glow of the arc reactor was only matched by the illuminated slits of his eyes. Other than that, the only lighting came from the sun's afterglow, touching on the flawless metal that melded into armor, seamless and smooth.

"Stark," Ross gasps. "He's insane. You need to detain him."

Percy can't help the smug twist of his lips when Tony's faceplate slides back, revealing the utter *fury* etched into the man's face. He takes a step forward, getting right into Ross's space. Then, softly, he says, "You messed with my kid."

The armor covers his head once more, and he moves a few feet behind Percy. "I told you that you wouldn't like how it ends."

Ross, frantic, redirects his attention up at Percy. Then, like fog he didn't know was there cleared away from his vision, he sees clearly. Ross sees, for the first time, who really stands above him. The man above him wasn't a man at all. No, there was something absolutely *wrong*. His mouth was full of curved, sharp teeth, and his eyes were bioluminescent in the darkness. Nobody, Ross realized, had eyes like that. That color. They *moved*, like his pupil was the eye of the storm and everything else was the hurricane.

Though they're miles from the ocean, Ross swears he can smell the sea breeze, can practically feel the agitated wind whipping at his skin. He thinks the sky clouds over, just a little, like when this *thing* in front of him gets angry, nature follows suit.

Ross sucks air in through his teeth. "You—you're—" He fumbles. Percy feels his pulse start hammering.

"Enhanced?" Percy finishes for him. "A mutant? One of the *roaches*?" He leans in, still smiling, unfriendly as can be. It sets Ross's hair on end, sends goosebumps across his skin and a cold shot down his spine. "*Subject C-4?*"

He feels the moment Ross realizes. The recognition, the dawning horror. Then, he spits at Percy's feet. "Go to hell, you freak."

It doesn't hurt as much as Ross intended. Percy's been called that more times than he can count, and it lost its bite long ago. Percy stands, swift and smooth, as the long drop of blood beads down Ross's neck. "I've been." He says. "You go."

There's one thing Percy hadn't listed to Ross.

You took James.

He drives the point of his blade into Ross's throat, stabs straight through. Blood bubbles up from the wound, streaming down his neck, staining the collar of his shirt. He's choking, hands weakly reaching up for his neck, but not strong enough to make it there. He's drowning, Percy knows, drowning in his own blood.

After all the blood he's spilled, of innocents, children, people who trusted him, Percy thinks it fits him nicely.

Percy wrenches both the man's life breath and his blade out together, and lets his body collapse onto the ground.

"So," The other man says, voice slightly distorted by the suit. "You going?"

Percy doesn't hesitate. "Yes. And you're going back home."

"The hell I am, Jackson."

The demigod shook his head. "There have to be other Raft escapees. You need to finish digging up all the dirt on Ross." He paused. "Peter needs you." Percy added.

Tony pursed his lips. "That's low, Jackson." But it was undeniably true, and Percy could tell he's won. "We can get someone to come with you."

Percy snorted. "Who, Tony, that won't..." The words died on his tongue. *That won't shoot James on sight if he isn't **James**.*

Tony lowered his head, a furrowed look on his face. "I don't like this." He said quietly.

"Yeah," Percy muttered. "Me neither. I'll leave my tracker on." He offered.

That loosened Tony's shoulders, ever so slightly. "Promise me you won't get on that boat. Swear to me you won't get that far. Not past Alaska."

The last promise Percy had made, he'd failed in spectacularly. He swallowed. "Not past Alaska." He echoed with a nod. The mere thought of the place made his stomach clench. Percy looks down at the reddened gravel. "You know, I almost died there when I was seventeen."

Tony looks stunned. Percy never really talked about his teenage years, not with him. The only people he spoke freely about it with was the people who were *there*. He never really offered up information like this.

“What happened?” Tony asked.

“I’d killed a Gorgon. When you do that, they drop two vials of blood as a trophy. One heals all ailments, the other kills you in the most terrible of ways. The two are identical. We needed information from someone named Phineas—an old, blind seer. Terrible man. So, I offered him a deal. He would write down the location, then pick a bottle to drink. If he got the wrong one, he’d die, and we would get the paper. If he got the right one, he’d have his sight back, and we would leave him alone.”

“And you would die.” Tony finished, horrified.

Percy hummed in agreement “I would die. Phineas...he had sworn allegiance to somebody who he thought was looking out for him. I knew that this person needed me for something. I knew I was more important to her than Phineas, and I bet my life on it.”

“That’s...” Tony trailed off, shaking his head. “That’s terrible.”

The demigod shrugged. “That’s life. Mine, at least. That part was in Portland. The paper we won from him led us to Alaska.” His expression grew distant. “I almost drowned there.”

“You?” Tony asked incredulously. “*Drowned?*”

Percy let out a humorless chuckle, still staring down at the ground. “Yeah, that’s what I thought, too, when I first heard the prophecy.” He cleared his throat. “*To the north, beyond the gods, lies the legion's crown. Falling from ice, the son of Neptune shall drown.*” He frowned. “The prophecy was incomplete. I did almost drown, in a muskeg. Suffocated, I suppose. But falling from ice...” Percy shook his head. “I did fall, but I didn’t drown there.”

Tony was just staring at him, a truly alarmed look on his face. Percy just gave him a sad smile. “Bad things happen to people like me in Alaska, Tony.” He brushed his senses against the rapidly cooling corpse to their left, then shrugged. “Not past Alaska.” He mimicked once more. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow.” Tony said quietly. Then, he shook his head, and Percy heard the suit power up as he touched off the ground, smoothly ascending into the sky.

With the flick of a hand, the blood wiped itself off of his blade, and he slid it back into its place on his back. He turns on his heel, and leaves the man's body to drain out into the gravel. Someone will find him, eventually. Not a human, he'd bet.

He's been in the area for almost ten minutes. His scent, along with the pungent smell of blood, was enough to catch the attention of most monsters in, if he was estimating on the smaller scale, a hundred mile radius. They'd be disappointed to find no demigod attached to the overwhelming blood scent, but, hey, no wise monster ever turned away a free meal.

True, they typically left mortals alone, but Ross had been in an enclosed space with the son of Poseidon for hours. He'd smell like a demigod enough to entice them.

This was little more than an idle thought to Percy as his feet crunched on the gravel as he headed in the direction of the tracks.

He had a train to catch.

Chapter End Notes

channeling the 2014 song fic in this chapter

i know that literally all of you bloodthirsty mfs were rallying for his death in the comments so. i hope it was as satisfying as you hoped.

tony telling ross he wouldn't like how it would end if he messed with spidey: >:(
ross, proceeding to mess with spidey anyways, and getting executed for it: :0

percy: i should try and be more open

percy: *tells one of the most horrifying stories of all time*

like...babes....maybe try some moderation

i dont think uncle rick never really says that ALL monsters eat demigods but,,why else would they hunt them down,,,,and why else would demigods be said to smell like buttered toast to them,,

just. imagine the extra layer of pure horror that would bring to the series. not only watching a young demigod die, but get eaten by a monster???

**THE AMAZING SALLOW MADE MORE ART GUYS!!! ANOTHER BLESSING!!!
YOU CAN CHECK IT OUT ON THEIR AO3 ACCOUNT!!!**

i've got fun and also emotionally devastating reels on insta @ beansofdenim :) also a little teaser for the finale of this fic is up there!!

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Strings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wednesday, August 15th

1:02 AM

Somewhere in Northern Michigan, USA

Percy had definitely had worse traveling experiences, for sure.

He'd have to rate this far below the Argo 2, but absolutely above the Princess Andromeda. Somewhere around a box truck filled with three mistreated animals, he'd say.

The train was bumpy and a bit loud, but Percy had long since perfected the art of falling asleep just about anywhere, from classrooms to on tiny ledges when Wade took over the stakeout. It got colder and colder as the night went on, but Percy didn't mind it much. Even if he wasn't able to survive subzero temperatures without the slightest shiver, his suit was insulated enough to keep a normal human comfortable. Tony really was a miracle worker.

He sat in the middle of the car, surrounded by crates and pallets of cargo, absently running his thumb over the scar on the back of his index finger over and over again. It had been pointed out to him many different times, by a few people, how often he did it. Not quite a nervous tick, but a thoughtful one.

The scar had been given to him by a Lithuanian gun for hire on his first mission as Deathstroke. Johnson's voice in his ear, Wade's presence by his side.

He missed those days, sometimes. Everything had been so much simpler. Nothing to worry about himself, and on the days they were together, Wade.

Percy cared about Tony, Peter, and James, of course, but some days he was brutally reminded that they were fallible. He had lost so many people over the years—was it really a surprise how attached he'd become to an unkillable mercenary?

One of the things, as a demigod, you always needed to remember was that you, too, were mortal.

Many half-bloods forgot that. They became consumed by their godly side, forgetting that they were two halves made whole. Percy had always been rather upfront with his own mortality. He could summon storms and carve fissures in the Earth, but he was not a God.

And even Gods could be killed.

Sometimes, he wondered if Wade felt alone, knowing one day, they would all be gone.

He truly hoped not. Percy decided he'd have to haunt his friend, if he had to, to keep him company.

Percy tensed every time he felt the train rumble over another set of tracks, trying his best to track its progress.

A hundred-fifty miles outside of Anchorage, Ross had said.

He couldn't help but think of Tony's wide eyes and horrified reaction to the things Percy had shared with him. It was an uncomfortable reminder as to why, when he had told Tony of the Godly world, he'd taken extreme care to make it as detached as possible.

Not *I led on a quest to retrieve the Master Bolt*, but just that there was a quest to recover it.

Never *I led a war at fifteen years old*, but just that a war happened a while back.

And most certainly not *I watched countless people I call friends die in front of me*. Just that people *kids, they were children*, died.

Percy didn't want people's pity. Not their shaken gasps, the way they would inevitably walk around him on eggshells. Percy Jackson had never been one for condolences.

He hadn't said it aloud, but he wished Tony was here with him. Quests always happened in groups—maybe not the traditional three, especially for him, but never alone. The only time Percy had been truly alone was when he was in the Pit, and he tried not to emulate anything like that.

But Tony and Peter should be together. Seeing Toomes again had bothered the kid, and his heart had been all funny, panicked and fluttery, even as he'd gone home. Tony could help Peter in a way Percy couldn't. He should be there with his kid.

There was another reason, too. Percy had made a promise to James. One that he, and he alone, would see out. The last time Tony and the man, whether he had been James or the Soldier, had fought, it had ended rather horribly. Percy didn't want to remind either of them of that.

Tony had agreed, in the end, that Percy had the best chances of getting James home safely.

And, though neither of them had said it aloud, he had the best chances of taking down the Soldier, if it came down to that.

Percy prayed to all the Gods he knew that it would not come to that.

But, then again, there were no Gods where he was going.

Like he had said to Tony before they had split, *bad things happen in Alaska.*

No Gods to look out for him. Not that they ever really had.

Percy sighed, shifting back so he was leaning against one of the walls. His hand laid on the hilt of one of his knives, and he closed his eyes, willing for sleep to come. As he did, he called out, hoping, waiting.

It came, as it always did.

He remembered this dream.

Over many years, Percy had gotten better at guessing which ones were real and which ones were just phantoms of his own mind.

Sometimes, he had them, and they took months, even years, to pass. Sometimes, he only had hours. The one where he was standing under the crushing weight of the school, heavy footsteps that he later learned belonged to the Rhino, echoing in his ears. That was the second that came to pass.

The first, from only three days ago, where he was standing in an office and listening to two men talk of casualties and business. The AcDec kids, the attack on the school. Ross.

There was only one other dream Percy had that he expected to come true.

*For one reason, and one reason only; it didn't scare him. It wasn't the type that took his worst fears, rolled it up, and shoved it back at him as soon as he fell asleep. This one was arguably worse. Worse, because it didn't scare him so much as it **unnerved** him. It was rare that a dream left him with a persistent chill down his spine, that made him pull in on himself and scan around him.*

This dream was that one.

*"Please," That voice, **his voice**, said again.*

It was snowing. Just like he remembered. Not a blizzard, far from it, but a light dusting that stuck to his hair and clothes.

Still, just like last time, hot blood hit the ground, and he could almost hear it sizzle, feel it turn gold. This wasn't Gaea, he reminded himself. This was different.

Everything was hazy. That happened sometimes—where he could glimpse into the future, but not clearly enough to make much use of it.

The snow kept falling, mingling with the blood on the ground.

Then, abruptly, he was nowhere.

Percy's worldview was a strange one. He gained information by the vibrations in the ground, the water in the air, how it moved and settled. How the miniscule amounts of water in living things

changed and shifted.

He could always make out *something* of his surroundings.

But now...he was nowhere. No ground, no walls, no *water*, except for what he carried in his own body.

Rather than feel, he just instinctively *knew* there were three old women standing in front of him. He just somehow knew their hair was gray, and they were all wearing loose, cotton pants, each in a different muted color, along with thick sweaters. He just knew the skin on their hands was old and crepey, and their faces set with deep wrinkles.

He just *knew* that they were staring at him with eyes full of wisdom that would forever be beyond him.

It was like all of this sensory information was being directly put in his brain, in the way he knew how to breathe and to blink and to move his muscles. Impossible to explain, but as natural as can be.

“Perseus.” Lachesis, the Fate of Life, greeted him.

He bowed his head. “Moirai.” He returned.

She, standing in the middle, was holding a giant ball of yarn. It was thick, sturdy, and a deep, rich red color. To each of her sides, one of her sisters held what seemed to be a large sock, knitting needles tucked into the front pockets of their cardigans.

“You are here to speak of James Barnes.” The woman to the left said. Her voice was neither low nor high, soft nor loud. It, somehow, held such a sense of *finality*, even without an ounce of emotion in it. He realized, horror pounding in his chest, that it was Atropos, the Fate of Death, who spoke, and, in her spare hand, there was a pair of gleaming shears.

“I am.” He said quietly. He lowered his head. “I know I don’t have much to give...” His fists tightened at his sides. “But I’ll let you have whatever it takes to get him back. Whatever that’s fully mine to give.”

The three Fates were silent. Looking at him, identical expressions upon their ancient faces.

Then, Clotho, Fate of Birth, spoke up. "I remember making this yarn." She said, rubbing the fibers in between her thumb and forefinger. "It was almost exactly a century ago. We do not allow mortals to live past their time, Perseus. You know this. He has lived long enough."

Percy squeezed his eyes shut, feeling them abruptly prick with tears. "You would call the last eighty years a *life*?" He whispered. "James Barnes hasn't lived since he was twenty-six. He hasn't lived since he fell off that train." His voice cracked. "*Please.*"

His nails were biting into his palm, leaving angry red crescents in the calloused skin.

Lachesis regarded him for a long moment. Then, "On the contrary. I believe, these last few months, he's been alive in a way he truly has not before."

Percy's brow furrowed. He opened his mouth to ask just what that meant, but before he could, Atropos slid her scissors into her crocheted handbag. He fell silent.

"I have seen the rise and fall of many heroes." Atropos said. "But, never, in all my years, have I seen one who's string has been intertwined with so many others. You are a different kind, Perseus Jackson."

He opened his mouth, then hesitated. "James...is his string one of them?"

"And never," Atropos added as if he hadn't spoken, "Have I had to untwist so many intertwined strings to cut one out, so many times."

It all flashed in front of him. Zoe's sparkling silver thread, Bianca's soothing ebony twine. Luke's, electric blue and so, so frayed, intertwined so tightly with his that it took all three of them to separate the two. Two golds, so similar yet so different, that he knew belonged to Lee Fletcher and Michael Yew. There was even a desaturated purple-gray that was recognizable as Ethan Nakamura's. Selina's soft cream, Beckendorf's olive green.

A soft, thick, gray yarn that might as well have fused with his own.

A earthy brown tone that screamed Nora Johnson.

Each and every one was detangled from his own, and countless others that branched out, strings that belonged to friends and family members of theirs that he never knew, other lives that these strings crossed over to. Each was pulled away, singled out, and cut in half, where it fell at his feet, piling up around his shoes, until he was standing atop a soft mound of ended lives.

A few feet in front of him, seemingly anchored to nothing, was a thread.

It was a soft, gentle sea green. More blue than green, like someone had taken his eyes and mixed in a few drops of cookie-blue food dye. It was made of countless strands, wrapped around and braided into one another to form a single cord.

It was frayed here and there, but ultimately strong and sturdy.

Unwittingly, he took a step forward. Then another and another, until he was but a few inches away from it. Hands trembling, Percy reached out. His hands ghosted around it, hesitant, before touching a single fingertip to it.

The breath was knocked out of him. In an instant, dozens of other strings came out of nowhere, all attaching themselves to his own and forming knots and bumps as they intertwined.

As it happened, he stood, transfixed.

A gentle blue, a soft baby pink, a striking navy, and, the thinnest and newest of the four, an almost hesitant sunrise-yellow. His mother, Estelle, Paul, and Lucas.

One, made of hotrod red and gold, fit in snugly with an eye-catching red and blue. Peter and Tony, tied firm knots around each other and his own string. One black, speckled with crimson, a soft gleam to the threads despite their rough appearance. Wade.

Lee's sage, Bridgette's lavender, Mal's buttercup, Dan's tangerine, Ross's violet. Among them, a thin, sickly string, a muted and drained cobalt that was getting more and more frayed by the minute.

Percy watched as Anev's string curled away from the others, splitting, but uncut.

There were countless others, with a soft shine to them that let him know they belonged to demigods. Easily, he could pick out Hazel and Nico, Frank, Leo, Jason and Piper, Reyna, Clarrise's, the Stolls, and so many others.

He could picture each one perfectly, the material and the color and the weight. How tightly or loosely they were attached to his own. It was unlike anything he'd ever experienced, like there was a pressure on the inside of his head, not quite painful, but most definitely strange.

As he ran his fingertip along his string, it caught his attention.

Buried under all the other strings, but next to his own— *right* next to his own, wrapped directly around it, was a rich crimson one. There were flecks of gunmetal gray, here and there, and it was thick and undoubtedly warm.

For the second time, and for a completely different reason, the air was stolen right out of him. Percy's lips parted, a thousand questions he would never quite learn to word correctly on his tongue.

Instead of asking, he ran his fingers over the wound threads, touch unbelievably gentle and reverent.

He felt it as the Fates were behind him, taking steps in unison to watch over his shoulder. "I suppose," She said in a hushed voice, "I forgot just how beautiful our little threads are." She tilted her head towards him, a slight smile quirking upwards on her lips. "It's nice to be reminded every now and then."

He swallowed thickly. "Why...why are you showing me this?"

Suddenly, the threads were gone, replaced instead by a persistent warmth in his chest. He turned to face the sisters. There was no answer they would give him, for that. If he wanted the answer to his question, he was going to have to learn it himself, one day.

"A long way from knitting socks at fruit stands," He instead commented quietly.

Lachesis smiled. "I suppose it has, Perseus."

Bucky woke up strapped down to a table.

The first thing he noticed was how unbelievably *cold* it was, and that's what set him off.

The Tower was never cold. It was always the perfect room temperature, often running on the warmer side. Even when Tony got hot enough to lay directly under the air conditioning, sprawled out and eyes closed as the cool air blew onto his skin, he never turned the thermostat down.

"He started doing it when he found out how sensitive Peter was to the cold." Percy had explained, standing somewhere in the kitchen.

"Peter's not here right now." Bucky had pointed out.

"Yeah," Percy agreed. "You are, though."

He'd been silent after that. Of course Tony and Percy had noticed—Tony was a genius, after all, and Bucky was half-convinced that Percy just knew everything.

The point was; the Tower was always warm. His apartment, especially. It never dipped below 70 degrees.

So when Bucky woke up, the first thing he thought was *ice*, then *cryo*, and then, finally, *I'm not at home*.

He wasn't sure when the Tower had become home. Maybe after he made up with Tony, after Peter had sat in the kitchen with him in the middle of the night, after Percy had fallen asleep right on his shoulder. Maybe he'd been thinking of it as home ever since Tony had given him an excited smile and started teaching him how to watch trashy reality television shows, or after Mrs. O'Leary started climbing in his lap to demand attention. Maybe it was after Percy would chat with him, a

soft, dimpled smile on his face as the smell of baking cookies filled the kitchen.

He wasn't home.

His limbs felt heavy, his head thick and slow. His skin felt numb, most notably on his left shoulder, which positively *ached*. The metal around his arm was absolutely freezing, so cold it hurt the flesh it touched.

Bucky remembered. Sitting in the Hub, Percy's coworkers tersely trying to focus on their own work. Foxglove, Archangel, Tremor, and Wraith. They were all quite different, personable in a way government agents never seemed to be.

Foxglove, dark hair and skin, whose lips turned up into a roguish grin, heavy combat boots resting atop her desk. Archangel, long, coppery braid trailing down her back, in flats and a pale sun dress. Tremor, who stood out there in the heat and sun waiting for him, rich brown eyes and a nice smile. And Wraith, shaggy blonde hair and piercing cobalt eyes.

Wraith, who looked directly at him as Hydra stormed inside, who looked not just accepting but *inviting*. Knowing.

Oh, this is going to just about kill Percy, was the only thing Bucky had thought as he, too, hit the floor.

And now, he was here.

Here, where the fate worse than death was to cause it. Here, where James Barnes might just die for good, this time.

Bucky squeezed his eyes shut.

Chapter End Notes

for everyone wondering, this was the chapter that made my beta cry
reader tears feed my strength

that moment when you're so gay that you pray directly to the fates
percy just. went straight to management huh

when he prays with bloody hands to fuel that religious trauma >>>>

plumbing baby. goodbye.

The Chair

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

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???

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Everything was a hazy blur of pain.

A mask was shoved over his face, no matter how much he thrashed and struggled. They pulled it over his mouth and nose, a mask and a muzzle all in one, and flipped a valve. The gas, whatever it was, smelled sickly sweet and coldly clinical at the same time.

He was out like a light.

When Bucky woke up, his world was an obscure, smoggy daze.

Voices, people standing over him. Always standing over him.

Their hands were cold and harsh, and they poked and prodded and *grabbed*.

Needles fit under his skin, both taking and giving. They stripped him down, exposing his skin to the numbingly cold metal table. It got to the point where he could only smell whatever came through that gas mask, and Bucky was unable to do as little as twitch a finger.

He had to lay there, paralyzed but *awake*, listening and feeling and devastating. He tried to tune them out, desperately, he tried. But no matter what, he always caught phrases.

The Asset.

Reactivate.

Missions.

Hail Hydra.

They had pliers. Pliers, and screwdrivers, and harsh, harsh hands.

Panels on his arm had been torn open, and he could *feel* them pulling out wires and yanking parts apart.

They were taking his arm apart while it was still attached to his body.

The arm Shuri had put so much care into, the arm that Tony had looked over and recalibrated with a joke and a smile. The arm that had become *his*, and not the Soldier's. How he pet Mrs. O'Leary and handed Peter a warm mug of tea, how he high-fived Tony and how he hugged Percy.

Hydra stripped it apart, bit by bit, and Bucky would have screamed if he could.

Freezing.

It was the cold. Always, always the cold.

Every time Bucky sluggishly opened his eyes, he wondered if years had passed. Maybe he would get sent out of this place to go do something terrible, and would find the life he had come to know was long gone.

Maybe the next time he walked out of this base, Shuri and Ayo and Peter and Tony and *Percy* would be nothing but an echo of the past, remembered by all they knew except for Bucky. Bucky, who would forget again, and again, and again.

He wouldn't *be* Bucky anymore.

The Asset. The Winter Soldier. A weapon. A blank slate.

A person, fuzzy and blurry, leaned over him. A white coat, gloved hands, and a cruel face.

A part of him hoped he would die here.

Die here, before they made him do something he could never do.

Something he could never atone for.

March 10th, 1930, and Steve had been sick.

It wasn't as bad as it was during the winter, the harsh, unforgiving months where they could barely afford to keep the heater on. Some days, Steve and his mom just *couldn't*, and they would end up spending weeks at a time at the Barnes household.

Bucky and his family were lucky. Even as the Depression rolled around, they'd always been able to stay afloat. His dad was a lawyer, and a pretty damn good one, too. A shark, George Barnes was. *Ruthless*.

Ruthless was what paid the bills, was what put good food on their plates, was what bought birthday presents for Rebecca. Sure, their lives got harder when the market crashed, but never as bad as it was for Steve and Sarah Rogers.

Bad enough that Bucky shared his lunches with Steve every day, bad enough that he dug around in his closet to find an old jacket to give to his friend.

Every time Steve came to school with a padly patched, *or not patched at all* , tear in his clothes, or his stomach rumbled but he did nothing about it, or his hands itched to draw but had nothing to sketch on, Bucky felt an irrational pang of guilt.

He knew it wasn't his fault that the Rogers family had such bad luck. That Joseph Rogers died before Steve was even born, that Sarah had to put in extra hours to make ends meet. It wasn't Bucky's fault that she desperately needed money, and volunteered to work in the TB ward for an extra few dollars a month. It wasn't his fault that she died a few months before Steve turned eighteen.

But Bucky still felt guilty. Like maybe, maybe, if he had done more, something else would have happened. Something better.

It wasn't guilt that made him come over every time Steve was sick; this was almost eight years before Steve's mother had died. Bucky came over when Steve wasn't feeling great—which was often—because he cared about the guy.

March 10th, Bucky's thirteenth birthday. He'd had a small party—a few friends from school came over to his house. Steve had been invited, of course, but he'd had a persistent fever and cough and had been in bed since morning.

Bucky ended up walking to his house with a thermos of soup his mom had given him and a book under his arm, pulling out the spare key he'd had to the Rogers household since he was nine.

Steve, in an all too familiar sight, was sitting in bed, a thick blanket wrapped around his thin shoulders. Bucky smiled at him, and when Steve raspily wished him a happy birthday, grinned. "I'm a teenager now, Stevie. You know what that means?"

His friend had given him a confused look, and shook his head.

Bucky had laughed, handed his friend the thermos and pulled a chair up to Steve's bedside. "Me neither."

And, like many days past and many days that would come, Steve silently sipped on his soup, the steam curling up to warm his face, while Bucky cracked open his book and read aloud. Today's book was *Years of Grace*— according to the papers, it was a damn good read. Bucky hadn't hesitated to check it out as soon as it was available.

Sure, he got made fun of now and then for tearing into new books like a man starving, but he never minded. He loved reading—when he wasn't at school or looking after Rebecca, he was typically curled up in their local library, right behind a stack of books as tall as he was.

Steve, like always, leaned back and listened attentively. He often told Bucky he had a nice voice—steady, calm. Bucky had just thought he was being nice, until Annalise Jenkins from his English class told him the same things, eyes averted and cheeks flaming red. Bucky had grinned at her, all teasing and smug, and she'd turned tail and bolted back to her friends waiting for her on the sidewalk.

Girls like Annalise Jenkins should have been what he thought about in his spare time. Annalise Jenkins, with her neatly pressed dresses and pinned hair, who held a talent for math and came from a decent family.

She was perfect.

Bucky, despite how hard he tried, was never really interested in her like that. Sure, she was fun to talk to and to work with in class, but he never thought of kissing her or holding her hand. She just wasn't the one for him, Bucky had decided.

He got a few chapters in before Steve fell asleep. It was getting late, he noticed, the sun dipping low on the horizon. He waited another hour for Ms. Sarah to get home, bidding her goodbye and starting the walk back home.

When Steve got sick, Bucky was usually with him. Whether it was at his house or the Barnes's, or, God forbid, the hospital. Bucky was always there.

He was always there, because, he feared, one day he'd wish he was when he wasn't.

Bucky was smart, despite his relative youth. He knew nobody Steve's age should be that small, that narrow or that thin. Nobody Steve's age should be bedridden for weeks on end like he was.

Steve Rogers was a stubborn bastard, though. He would outlast any sickness by sheer force of will.

(That's what they joked, at least.)

But Bucky knew, every time Steve closed his eyes, wheezing and shivering, he might not open them again. He would be there, Bucky vowed. To the end of the line.

Then he went off to war. When Bucky got drafted, he put on a smile and tried to act proud to serve his country. He was, don't get him wrong. He'd like to put those Nazi sons of bitches into the ground himself, if he could. But leaving meant not just leaving his mom, his dad, his sister, but Steve.

Steve, who would be all alone.

When the Germans captured the 107th, Bucky had thought that would be it for him. But then they got passed along to something called *Hydra*, and his life had changed.

Steve came and got him. Steve, now a good foot and a half taller and at least a hundred pounds heavier, led an assault on the Hydra base and rescued them all. And Captain America was born.

The Howling Commandos became family. Steve, Peggy, Morita, Montgomery, Falsworth, Dum Dum, Sawyer, Pinkerton, Juniper. Steve was always closest to Bucky, though, and he got the pleasure to watch his friend fall truly in love.

Peggy Carter was a fantastic storm of a woman, and Bucky thought that there was nobody out there who was better for his best friend.

They fought together. Battle after battle, Steve could always be found near Bucky. And, Bucky soon learned first hand, that his friend hadn't just gotten taller. He could outpace a tank, took hits that would have landed any other man on their back, ripped doors off their hinges and punched holes through metal.

Steve Rogers finally had a body to match his spirit, and Bucky couldn't be prouder of him.

Somewhere along the way, the idea that he would be there when Steve died faded away. It got replaced.

He thought about it as he laid at the bottom of that ravine, rapidly losing consciousness and numbed to the bone. He thought about it when he woke up with doctors leaning above him that spoke German and Russian. He thought about it when he stared down the barrel of a gun in the Council building.

Bucky thought about it now, laying there and wishing it would just be *over*, because he would take death over the bleak, bleak existence of the Soldier.

Bucky had always thought Steve would be there when he died.

He wasn't. Steve wasn't here, nor Ayo, Shuri, Tony, Percy.

Bucky was alone.

He knew it would happen eventually.

He'd been expecting it, anticipating it, but when it finally did, he'd never felt more unprepared for anything in his entire life.

Rough grips on his arms, they hauled him up and began to drag him away. He wanted to scream and to thrash, but he could barely lift his head. It was a terrible thing, being dragged back to your own personal Hell, and not even being able to protest because your tongue felt so heavy in your mouth.

In all the months of BARF, there was always one thing he'd never been able to face.

Maybe this was the universe's cruel retribution for his inability. He couldn't face it when he was sitting in a cushy chair surrounded by Tony's encouraging voice and Percy's soft touch, so he had

to do it now, barely aware of his surroundings, everything a muddled mess except for his heart pounding in his ears.

The chair.

He wanted to scream and to cry and to pull away, and he couldn't because they forced a mask on his face and everything smelled like sickly sweet gas, and he just had to *lay there*—

They forced him into the chair, and he felt like vomiting. His skin was crawling and everything was numb and distant, like he wasn't really there. Like this was just a terrible story Bucky was reading, that he was sitting at Steve's bedside with a library book in his lap.

"I don't like this one," Steve would say, brows furrowed.

Bucky would agree. "Me neither. Too sad." And then he'd close the book and return it to the library, a slight heaviness in his heart. He didn't like books without happy endings. Books with sad endings, he thought, should have the right to be sad. They needed to earn it, they needed to teach you something or change who you were.

He didn't think he had earned it. There was no lesson here.

Bucky had escaped, he'd gotten away, he was getting *better*, and yet none of it had mattered. Was that the message of the story? That no matter what you did, in the end, you couldn't even put up a fight?

"I believe in you, James."

Percy's face was always so expressive. Sometimes, Bucky lost himself taking in how earnest the man looked, how true his emotions always seemed when they were on his face. His eyes, so unique and full of life, crinkled and his face dimpled when he laughed, and he'd throw his head back. Percy laughed loudly and unrestrained. It was intoxicating.

His laugh was the type that made you smile, too. When Percy laughed, it was like the whole world stopped to listen.

When he was sad, it was like the whole sky clouded over, the sun went into hiding when his face fell. Sadness looked unnatural on Percy's face, in a way that made wrongness settle into Bucky's chest.

He could practically see it, now, the way Percy would stand, deadened and uncomprehending, just for a second, when he found out what happened.

Bucky had seen Percy cry before, and to this day, it was one of the worst things he had even witnessed. He'd wanted to thumb away the tears, to do whatever it took to make it stop, to make it never happen again.

He didn't think he could stand it if that happened again, if Bucky was the cause of it.

The straps were fastened over his wrists, his upper arms, across his chest and ankles.

Maybe that was where the two of them were different. Bucky had been made to be unfeeling, to be cold as the ice the Soldier was born into. Smiling and laughing and everything in between no longer came easy to him, not like it used to be.

Bucky was cold. He spent so long in the ice, that he was sure he'd taken part of it with him when he escaped. The cold had sunk into his bones, frozen his veins and maybe just his heart.

Percy was warm. He smiled as easily as he breathed, felt so *much* even though it hurt.

He remembered what Tony had said, what seemed like a lifetime ago. That Percy had a heart a few sizes too large for his chest, that he'd lost people again and again. Bucky hated the knowledge that he would be next on that list.

Bucky had asked Percy to kill him, if it came down to it.

He'd never felt worse about a decision in his entire life. He felt, deep in his bones, that Percy *could*, but it might just be what tipped him over the edge for good.

Who was going to tell Shuri and Ayo? Who was going to tell the Rogues? Who was going to tell

Steve?

Sure, they hadn't left things as well as Bucky wished they'd had. He remembered how angry he'd been, his fists clenched tightly as he gave his oldest friend a piece of his mind.

I hope by the next time I see you again, you've got your head out of your ass.

That's what Bucky had yelled.

He'd never really considered there wouldn't be a next time.

Steve was being an ass, sure, but Bucky cared about him. Under all the layers, behind the cowl and the shield, that scrawny little runt who sat and listened to Bucky as he read with wide, intrigued eyes. The Steve Rogers that Bucky knew and loved was still here, even if he was buried a little deep.

He wished he could have said goodbye.

Chapter End Notes

today i would like to share with you some of my beta's notes on the doc they beta on:

"SHAWDY NO ITS OKAY PERCY'S COMING"

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAa"

"gay people"

"crying and shitting my pants"

"i like your funny words magic man"

"☺ i am not okay ☺"

shout out to edene for offering no criticism to me ever <3

anyways

@beansofdenim on insta, we got character art, sad reels, and, after this fic finishes up (soon), a trailer coming up for the third installment!

take your crumbs of bucky backstory and leave

plumbing baby. goodbye.

A Red Star

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Goodbye.

There were a lot of people he'd never gotten to say it to.

His parents. His sister. His friends.

He said it to Steve when he deployed. He never got to say it before falling off that train.

Bucky never imagined he'd need to do it again.

No closure. Not for Shuri, for Ayo, for Tony, for Peter, for Percy.

And most certainly, none for Bucky.

They wrapped the cuffs around his right hand, layer over layer until he couldn't so much as curl his fingers. His left arm dangled uselessly at his side, and they tied a strap across it anyway.

Bucky never really believed in destiny. He always thought that your life was what you made of it; there was no set plan or path that you were meant to take.

In his drugged state, he found himself wondering what the others would think.

Shuri and Tony, so contrasted yet so similar, would probably agree with him. They were sharp, analytical minds, logic-based and driven. The two of them were both the type to not believe in anything that couldn't be proven. If there was no data, there was no existence.

He imagined that, if he asked Percy, the man would say something oddly, gently profound, and that no matter his stance on the matter, it would end up surprising Bucky. Looking back, he wished

he could have asked.

Do you believe in Fate, Percy Jackson?

Do you think that where you are now is where you were meant to be? Do you regret it? Do you wish it was different?

Maybe this was Bucky's fate. To be nothing but a blank slate, nothing but a gun that was aimed by cruel, greedy men. Bucky had done everything to get away from this place, to get away from Hydra, to get away from *himself*, but it hadn't taken. It hadn't worked.

So maybe this really was how his life was supposed to play out.

No will, no ability to choose. Maybe Bucky Barnes was always destined to be controlled.

He wasn't like Peter, who held that optimistic versatility of youth, whose life could go in a million directions and he would succeed in every one of them. Not like Tony, brilliant and always a wild card, who's headstrong and ungovernable. He most certainly wasn't like Percy, wonderful, intractable, unafraid Percy, who told off Councilmen and stood straight in his vehement defense of Bucky. When Bucky looked at Percy Jackson, he saw someone who would never really be restrained.

Bucky wasn't like him, though. He wasn't like any of them.

They brought down the headgear, shoved a bite guard in between his teeth. It was so incredibly sad that he couldn't even turn his head away as they gripped his jaw.

All of his fighting, all of his resistance, all that work to become himself once more. And he couldn't even fight back.

Maybe he was always meant to be controlled in the most tragic of all ways.

The dark metal, scuffed and slightly scratched from years and years and *decades* of use, fit up to his temples and around the back of his head like it was sculpted to him. It fit perfectly. It *always* fit

perfectly.

The worst part, he always remembered, was hearing it charge up. It was the low, electric humming that set his hair on end before he'd even known why. Every time, that sound just made it so, so *real*.

Bucky closed his eyes, and valiantly tried to ignore the tears that collected in his lashes.

He could feel it building up, all around him, the machine readying and the sudden silence of the onlookers. They always quieted down, stopped conversations to watch his life being ruined, again and again and again. Everyone always grew silent to stare, to observe and take in the death of Bucky Barnes.

It hurt.

It always *hurt*.

The machine sent pulse after pulse of electricity directly into his skin, past his skull and into his brain. Though it had been done to him too many times to count, every time he screamed.

Bucky's vision went white, body trying to struggle against the restraints, to writhe in agony. But he couldn't. He couldn't move his head, he couldn't lift his arms, he couldn't try to stand. He could just squeeze his eyes shut and *scream* though the bite guard.

His tortured cries rang out through the chamber, echoing off the cold concrete walls to meet his ears once more.

Then, everything went dark.

His first thought was that he'd blacked out. It wouldn't have been the first time. But he could still feel the cold air against his skin, feel the leather and metal of his restraints, the rubber wedged into his mouth.

The machine had stopped.

He was left gasping for breath, limp and dazed.

He heard the thuds, the cries, the occasional splatter of gunfire through the static in his ears. The alarmed yells, the heavy footfalls. He heard the enraged roar, sounding almost inhuman.

A door was kicked in.

It was pitch black, but Bucky felt the restraints not being undone, but *torn* off of him. Hands, gentle and so, so warm, unlike everything here, came up to his face. “Oh, Gods.” A voice whispered. And then he was pulled out, away from the machine, away from the chair. He fell to his knees on the concrete, and there was a strong pair of arms around him.

Percy held him close to his chest, his face buried in Bucky’s hair. “James,” He gasped, like he couldn’t quite believe he was there. “Oh, Gods, *James*.”

He was crying.

Bucky closed his eyes and leaned into the embrace, tears streaking down his cheeks. He leaned into the scent of lavender and the sea breeze, and he wept.

Percy didn’t let go of him. Not as he supported Bucky, still suffering from the effects of whatever sedative they gave him, out of the facility and into the sunlight.

His arm remained around his waist as they stepped into a quinjet, as Percy sat him down and ran his fingers through Bucky’s hair, both as a comfort and to check for head injuries. Bucky leaned against his shoulder, drained and shaken.

But safe.

When they got to the Tower, Tony was waiting for them. He yanked Bucky into one of the tightest hugs he'd ever gotten, then accompanied him and Percy to medical. Neither of them left his side the entire time he was there.

Tony's face was nothing but fury when he got a look at Bucky's mangled left arm, the evidence at what Hydra had done written all over the destroyed limb. He ended up having to take it off completely. It was unsalvageable.

Eventually, he excused himself, torn up limb in hand, to go and call Shuri.

Bucky had never liked having his arm taken off.

Well, at first, when it wasn't Bucky's arm, but the Soldier's, he relished in its absence. It was a pain to go through life without his other hand, but he managed.

After Shuri had gifted him a new one, he supposed he forgot what it was like to have it. He'd gotten used to it so quickly, and the few times she'd taken it off for maintenance it had truly felt like he'd lost his arm for the first time.

Percy got up and walked around the cot Bucky was sitting on, abandoning his seat on Bucky's right to sit next to him.

On his left.

He had nightmares.

He'd always had nightmares, but these were so, so much worse.

Bucky barely made it half an hour before waking himself up screaming, shaking and ice cold despite the warmth of the Tower.

Percy started sitting on his couch, watching over Bucky as he slept. He knew the other man kept close attention on his heartbeat, ready to wake him whenever something happened. And wake him he did, time after time. It got to a point where Bucky wasn't quite sure whether or not Percy was sleeping, at all.

Over time, he could see the dark circles that slowly deepened beneath his eyes.

The last BARF session was daunting.

He knew what it would be. The only thing he hadn't yet confronted in the sessions.

Tony recommended that he wait before doing it. Bucky had shaken his head. "Whatever I'm going to see there," He said quietly, "It can't be worse than what actually happened."

How could a memory, and aftereffect, scare him as much as the real thing?

Easy. It couldn't.

Bucky sat down in the lab as Tony silently attached the pads to his temples, and Percy leaned against the wall with a slightly pinched look.

The Winter Soldier was gone. Dead. For good, this time.

Why didn't it feel like a victory?

The weeks passed, blurred together in monotone and shades of gray.

Sometimes, when Bucky woke up, he still felt ice cold.

School started up, and Peter spent less time around the tower. Percy went to visit his family, to be there when his sister and Lucas went off to school for their first day.

Bucky remembered doing that for his own sister. He'd always walk her to her elementary school, hand in hand as they crossed the streets. He used to help her with math and english assignments, helped her pick books from the library when she asked.

One of his fondest memories of *before* was picking her up and swinging her around, lifting her so she was sitting on his shoulders. With her newfound height, she would look over all the books on the higher shelves, and pick one for him.

Becca picked some truly awful books sometimes. He always read them anyway.

Shuri's words, only a few months past but seemingly a lifetime ago, stuck in his mind.

He remembered it vividly. Sitting in that conference room, in a chair as far from Tony as he could get. The man had been avoiding eye contact like his life depended on it. To be fair, though, so was Bucky.

An unfamiliar person came in—bronze skinned and dark haired, sunglasses and a jacket with the WSC crest on it. He was introduced as a Commander, and took a seat without so much as a greeting.

He remembered how Shuri had shifted on her end of the call, a slightly guilty look on her face.

“ To fully test your condition after the final treatment, the trigger words will have to be said. One last test.”

He'd excused himself after that.

Percy sat down across from him, silently working his way through a stack of papers, his lunch forgotten on a plate to the side. The methodical clicking of his typing, the way he tapped his middle finger on the corner of his laptop when he was thinking, was oddly calming.

Calming was a good word for Percy.

It was still warm out, though the sun was letting up a tad as August faded away into September. The curtains had been thrown open, bathing the room in a soft golden light. It smelled like fresh, baking bread, enveloping the air and making everything smell warm.

Despite it all, Bucky felt something heavy, something uneasy, resting in his gut.

The trigger words loomed over him, like dark shadows.

Sure, he'd completed the last BARF session. But there was no way of telling until somebody *tried*. Though it was created by the two smartest people Bucky had ever met, there was always a chance that it didn't work. That something went wrong.

And the only way to disprove that was to tell somebody. Tell somebody the words that had ended Bucky's life, that had shackled him for eighty years.

It was daunting. But, for some reason, Bucky didn't find himself as scared as he used to be at the idea. Freedom was within his grasp for the first time in eighty years.

“Shuri said I needed to tell somebody the trigger words.”

Percy’s hands stilled over his keyboard. The man swallows, then nods. “Yeah,” He says. “I heard.”

Bucky looks down at his hand resting on the tabletop. Since a young age, he’d always had callouses decorating his palms. It used to be from his job down at the docks. It was physical labor; hard and demanding. Truthfully, Bucky hadn’t needed to work that job. Especially not as a teenager.

He hadn’t needed the money for himself.

But when he threw an arm around Steve’s narrow shoulders with a grin, telling him about his newly earned wages with a smile, and insisted on buying his friend a meal, it came off as bragging. Not charity.

Steve would have hated charity.

Now, he had calluses from the handle of a knife, the smooth wood of a staff, from rifles and every other weapon that was placed into his hands.

“I think I’m ready.”

Percy’s lips parted in surprise. Then, he closed his laptop and nodded. “Whoever you need to call, I can get them here by tomorrow morning.”

“No need.” He replied levelly. “He’s sitting right in front of me.”

That got him a slightly floored expression. “You—you want to tell *me*?” Percy fumbled.

Bucky nodded, ducking his head down. “I, well, if you don’t mind.”

He risked a glance up, only to see Percy staring at him with a smile that was like the sun coming

out from behind the clouds. “I’m honored.”

They decide to do it right then, right there. *It’s actually happening.* Again, Bucky, oddly enough, feels nothing but calm. The uneasiness he’d felt minutes ago had dissipated, leaving only a lazy tranquility.

All of Percy’s attention is focused on him, those otherworldly green eyes sharp and waiting. He’d say *expectant*, but that wasn’t like Percy.

Bucky took a deep breath. For all his stress, all the work he’d put in...this felt oddly anti-climatic. That was probably a good thing though.

“Желание.” Buckys says, void of emotion.

For a second, just a second, he sees Karpov.

“Ржавый.”

But it’s not. For once, it’s Bucky saying the words.

“Семнадцать.”

Percy’s eyes have never looked so intense. There’s a strange gleam to them, boring straight into Bucky’s skull as he listens.

“Рассвет.”

He hasn’t budged from his position, hands folded on the tabletop. Percy isn’t slouched, relaxed, but perfectly straight in his seat. All the sessions, all the work, had led up to this. In his last session-

“Печь.”

The words start to taste like ash. His last session. What had he seen in his last session?

“Девять.”

Bucky’s eyes flit to the left, past Percy’s folded hands, to the half-eaten sandwich.

“Добросердечный.”

It’s cut in two rectangles.

“Возвращение на Родину.”

For a moment, it’s right after his first BARF session, right after he arrived in the tower. Percy, standing above him, handing him a plate. A glass of water, a pile of baby carrots, a bag of chips, and a ham and cheese sandwich. Cut into triangles.

“Got a problem with triangles?”

“No, no.”

“Good. Triangle sandwiches are the only acceptable kind.”

His eyes slowly flicker back up to Percy. Percy, who hasn’t said a word, Percy, who’s oddly upright and stilted. Percy, whose eyes are green.

Just green.

Not like the depths of the oceans, the swirling of currents and the whistling of winds, the eyes of a *storm*.

His eyes are just green.

Like there was just something about Percy Jackson that was truly impossible to replicate.

“Товарный вагон.” It’s not Bucky’s own voice, but the man sitting across from him, finishing the sequence. He smiles, off-kilter and unfamiliar. He’s holding something, now. A red book, a black star emblazoned in the middle of the cover. He slides it across the table without breaking eye contact, that pleasantly blank smile still present on his face.

Shaking hands, trancelike, Bucky opens it.

It's damaged. Waterlogged and torn, the ink on every page smudged beyond repair. Except for one.

The finishing word of the trigger sequence was written clear as day.

"We never were able to get the rest of the words." This man, because he is a stranger, taps his forefinger on the tabletop. "Just the last one."

"You're not Percy." It's ripped out of him, brutal and terrible.

Don't let them in. *Don't let them take me.*

The man stands up. "Oh, Asset." He croons. "Nothing is anything, here." He walks around the table to Bucky, leans against it. Every muscle in Bucky's body is locked up, frozen. He can't move, and he is unsure if that's from what Hydra has done to him, or the pure *horror* running through his body.

He couldn't do it again. The nightmares, the paranoia, the **guilt**.

DON'T LET THEM IN AGAIN.

A cold fingertip touches his forehead. Cold as ice. "Nothing is anything." The man repeats. "None of this is real, Asset." He takes a look around the room. Once well lit with warm, orange sunlight, it has turned darker and darker. Snow starts to breeze through the open window, piling up on the floor.

Bucky was not home. In fact, he doubted he'd ever be home ever again.

"It was nice while it lasted, though, wasn't it?"

Chapter End Notes

ENJOY LMAO

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Comply

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wednesday, August 15th

10:42 AM

Somewhere near Anchorage, Alaska

Just as Ross had promised, there were people waiting for him.

As the train came to a slow, screeching halt, Percy got to his feet, stretching his legs and rolling his shoulders. Despite it being late summer, it was cold out, hovering a dozen or so degrees above freezing.

He'd passed near a couple cities, he was pretty sure, but was now miles away from any sort of civilization. It was both a comfort and a stressor. While on one hand, the fact that Hydra was this secluded wasn't great—out here, they wouldn't even have to try and hide anything. On the other, he wouldn't have to try and hide anything here. No witnesses.

He could work with that.

The minute Percy stepped out of the train car, his foot touching the ground, he felt it. Or, well, the lack of it.

Percy was used to everything having a *feeling* to it. The winds could be agitated, the sea friendly, the sun could rise and greet him in the morning. Everything in his world belonged to somebody. It was alive, in its own unique way.

But here?

It was empty, here.

The breeze didn't have a personality, a God. It just *was*. The water didn't call to him like an old

friend, instead it just moved along of its own accord. Percy could still feel the streams, lakes, rivers, could use that little tug in his gut to shape the water to his will, but it felt so... *clinical*. It felt like nothing was truly alive in Alaska.

The thought made something crawl down his spine. He had to remind himself that there wasn't a glacier full of ghosts waiting for him, that a Giant wouldn't be standing in his path to Death.

He had to remind himself that Gaea was dead, for good. No muskeg, no drowning. She was gone. He'd made sure of it.

Two people, a man and a woman, stood dressed in dark thermals, hands stuffed into their pockets and breath visible in the chill. As he made his way towards them, Percy made a conscious effort to straighten up, to square his shoulders, and tilt his chin ever so slightly upwards. He had a part to play, after all.

His steps were measured and confident, and as he caught their attention, he stuck his hand out. "Jackson." He introduced. They both nodded at him, handshakes firm.

"Tara." The woman said. She was above average height, narrow shoulders and hips. He could faintly hear the wind whistling through her hair, which was dark and pulled back into a loose plait.

"Noah. Base isn't far from here." The man added on. His build was slight, and he was around the same height as Tara. His hair, too, was dark, the same color as Tara's. It was quite short, almost buzzed, and had lanky, awkward limbs, all elbows and knees.

They both sounded rather young—just how much, he couldn't tell.

Percy, helmet tucked under his arm, razor sharp sword in its place on his back, smiled at them. "A pleasure."

They lead him away from the tracks, across the long, wild grass that bent and flattened under their boots. Wildflowers dotted the ground here and there, providing a vibrant contrast to the greens and tans of the grass. The clearing around the tracks wasn't too large; the tree line was only a couple thousand feet away.

Gradually, their trail turned steeper and steeper as they made it into the forest, leaving the train

behind. Percy focused on mapping out where they were going, memorizing every slight turn they took. He traced their path, away from the network of rivers, sloping upwards. There was a large hill about a mile or so to the northeast, and a couple thin, winding streams branching out ahead of them.

A proper river, too, going miles in each direction. It was far from a sole channel; it wound over itself a thousand times, branching off and meeting pieces of itself again and again as it went on. It was the Susitna—it meant *sandy river*, he was fairly sure. He could feel the tributaries flowing into it, nine in total. The whole thing was about a half mile behind the tracks, and though the abundant sources of water soothed a frazzled part of him, a warm reminder of his advantages out in the wilderness, he also didn't like the fact that they were walking directly away from it.

"Ross didn't tell us much about you." Tara said, breaking the silence and pulling him away from his thoughts. Her voice was surprisingly low, steady and smooth. "Just said to be waiting and to take you to base."

Percy hummed. "Yeah, that sounds like him, all right." He said it lightly, like he was remarking about an old friend and not a man who made him feel a bit sick at the mere mention.

"He's a character, all right." Noah said with a slight laugh. "I've never met somebody who's mustache could show aggravation, but..."

Tara laughed, and so did Percy. "I'd tell him to shave it if I didn't think he'd take it personally."

The air around them smelled fresh, unique in the way that only came out after a rainstorm, the heavy kind that left puddles on the ground and turned the dirt to mud. Petrichor, it was called. The soil was soft and forgiving, the rivers and lakes just a little bit fuller than normal. It was nice.

"Oh, thank the Lord. Our last boss practically worshiped the ground Ross walked on." She said it lightly, but there was real emotion hiding under her words. What it was, Percy couldn't quite yet place.

"Last boss?" He repeated.

Noah shrugged. "Yeah, he was...intense. A fanatic, some said." Those last few words were said with extreme caution, an edge to them. Percy's eyes narrowed, but the two were facing the trail ahead, not him. .

After a second, he decided not to ask them to elaborate. He didn't want to push and risk making them suspicious—he didn't want to put anyone on edge until it was far too late. Percy sighed. "I've had my fair share of those." He tried to sound friendly, inviting. "Not my style."

The both of them relaxed, ever so slightly. They sounded young—painfully so. Younger than him, most definitely. He'd place his bets somewhere around twenty, no older. Percy swallowed down a lump in his throat.

"You're here for the Asset?" Tara prompted.

"Yes." He said automatically. Then, he hesitated. Time to take a chance. "I plan on taking a different approach than his last handlers."

Tara jolted at the word *his*, like she wasn't used to hearing him referred to as a person. Percy grit his teeth together.

"Different?" Noah said faintly.

Percy gave a nonchalant shrug. "Don't tell your other bosses this," He said teasingly. "But I think there's a better way to deal with the whole situation. I mean, of course he left when he had the chance. He wasn't treated well by his handlers. It's human nature to yearn for freedom. If you want someone to stay, you don't lock them in a cell."

"You make them think there's no reason to leave." Noah finished faintly. There seemed to be a mix of reassurance and uneasiness in his words, and Percy wasn't quite sure how to interpret that.

"So," Tara said, incredulous, "You're going to...what? Be nice to him?"

"He's Hydra's best Asset. He should be treated as any good soldier should." Percy said firmly, quelling the queasy feeling in his stomach.

Both of the footsoldiers went silent. They continued on for a few, heavy minutes. Then, "Tell me about the base."

“It’s not super large,” Noah said after a beat. “More of a compound, really. One floor. Barracks, a mess hall, a small prison, and the main building.”

Like the one in Ontario, Percy couldn’t help but think.

“Mr. Lewis is in charge of it—we all report to him. To you, now, I suppose. Mostly guards and foot soldiers, and a few scientists and doctors.” Tara continued.

“And you two?” Percy further dug for information. Tara gave a little shrug. “We just work in the filing room.” She said quietly. “We volunteered to come down here and accompany you. Everyone else was too busy. It’s been hectic these last few days.”

The rest of the walk is quiet. The air gets even colder as they get higher in altitude, flat ground turning to the slopes of a mountain trail. The trees get thicker, as does the vegetation on the ground. Grass goes up to his knees, brushing against his pants every step he takes.

He’s aware of the base before they come into view of it. It’s *loud*, hundreds of overlapping voices and footsteps, the sound of dishes clinking together and cloth rustling as people move. It’s a bit hard to tell with the distance, but he would estimate over two hundred people inside the compound.

It’s a few buildings, like the two had said. Low ceilings, concrete and steel. There’s a tall, thick fence surrounding the entire place, topped with barbed wire. A guard is posted here and there, patrolling both on the inside and outside of the fence. As the three walk by, the one nearest them stops in his rounds, gaping slightly at Percy. He raises a sole eyebrow at him, and he hurriedly turns away.

Noah and Tara fall into place behind him as he marches up to the gate. Percy doesn’t even say anything, just lets the guards get a good look at his face, the sword on his back, and black and scarlet armor. The barbed wire gate creaks open not even a minute later, and he strides inside.

Tara quietly murmurs to him where to go, and then she and Noah fade off into the background, slipping away into one of the smaller buildings that he guesses, due to the lack of people inside, is a filing or storage room of some sort.

You belong, you belong, Percy chanted in his head as he strode towards the main building, paying the various people ogling him no mind. He repeated to himself that Ross hadn’t contacted anybody

after Percy revealed himself. That as far as Hydra was concerned, Percy was here to help.

It didn't help calm him as he walked right into the lion's den.

Inside was cold. It bit at his exposed skin, and he clenched his jaw. He stood at the end of a long hallway, steel doors leading into other rooms and halls on each side. Percy didn't bother poking around—he went straight, where the hall opened up into a large, rectangular room. A few steps led down onto the floor, where most of the people seemed to be. The area against the walls, wrapping around the room, was a raised platform with a metal railing, overlooking the rest of the chamber.

There was a man leaning against the railing, staring down at the people bustling about. Percy walked a few paces into the room, letting his heavy boots hit the floor enough to echo. The man raised his head almost immediately, straightening up once he caught sight of him.

Percy met him halfway. "Aaron Lewis." The man said, extending a hand. Percy shook it evenly. "Jackson." He returned. "You were expecting me."

It wasn't really a question.

"Ah. Yes." Lewis cleared his throat. Percy's eyes narrowed imperceptibly. The man was sweating. Experimentally, he shifted his weight, and Lewis leaned away.

Interesting.

When the man didn't say anything else, Percy gave him a sardonic look with a cocked eyebrow. "I do believe I have a job to do." He said harshly.

Lewis swallowed. "Right. Erm, follow me." He awkwardly stepped around Percy, heading down the steps onto the floor. Percy trailed after him, slowly turning his head to pretend to take in the area around him, knowing the Mist would take care of the rest. People shrunk back from his focus, ducking down or turning, shoulders drawing in and heads lowered.

Percy never relished in the fear of others. But maybe he enjoyed these people's trepidation. These people, he thought as he followed Lewis, deserved to be scared. They earned this fear, and all that would come later.

The building's foundations were deep, all the way down to bedrock. Granted, that wasn't as far down as most places, but still sturdy and unforgiving.

They walked under another AC vent, blasting directly on the back of Percy's neck, and he resisted the urge to curl into himself against the icy air. Everything was freezing here. It wasn't even this cold outside, meaning that this was on *purpose*.

The fury that swept through Percy was immediate and all consuming, and he knew right then, that he would have no problems ripping this place right out from the bedrock it was embedded into.

He was led down a hallway, then another and another. The entire time, Lewis was nervously fidgeting with his hands, casting the occasional tiny glance over his shoulder at Percy, who pretended not to notice.

Eventually, the man halted at a metal door, heavy and at least half a foot thick. Lewis clears his throat. "It's a biometric lock. Your...ahem, arrival, was a bit short notice. You'll be added into the system rather quickly." He assured.

Personally, Percy was rather glad he wasn't in yet. Hydra did *not* need his thumbprints. Besides, he didn't plan on sticking around long enough to be added in anyway.

The door opened sluggishly, the metal creaking and scraping against itself in a high pitched whine that made him cringe. The frigid breeze hit him instantly, carrying the soft smell of spruce and evergreen trees, wildflowers, and ozone. It was nice, actually. Far too nice for a place like this.

Minutes ago, when he'd stepped inside, it had been crisp outside. Now, it was almost biting at him, temperate breeze turned bitter wind. Clouds had rolled in, blanketing the sky and casting shadows across the entire facility. The sun's rays were hidden from them, its soft golden glow gone.

When they stepped out onto the grass, it crunched under their feet. Lewis was still shifting his weight around, even as they came to a stop. "They'll be here in a moment." He offered weakly.

Percy mentally side-eyed the man. His heart was rapid and fluttery, a mix of nerves and fear. He couldn't help but wonder what the hell Ross had said in his message to get this kind of reaction from the man. Percy knew he could be intimidating, when he felt like it, but Lewis was already nervous before he caught sight of Percy.

It was then he remembered what Tara had said on the hike here. Percy was technically this dipshit's *boss* now.

Huh.

The courtyard they were standing in was walled in, high concrete surrounding them. A few targets and training dummies were shoved against a far wall, but other than that, it was mostly empty space. The only other exit was a large iron gate that melded in with the wall, solid and thick. It, like the door behind them, opened with a shrill creak.

It was a group of four guards, all wearing thermals like Tara and Noah had been, but with kevlar vests and pads added. The two in the back had their guns out, and the two in the front had their hands resting on their holsters.

In the middle of the group, Percy caught a familiar heartbeat. He breathed in sharply.

"Everyone, out." He barked. Lewis turned to him, eyes wide, and Percy held a hand up to stop him before he could speak. "Did you not hear me? I said *out*." He snapped, voice harsh. Lewis nodded hurriedly, taking a step back, the guards following him. They all went back into the building, and as soon as the door closed behind them, Percy wasted no time, water pulling itself out of the ground and coating the entrance, hardening over into ice thicker than his forearm. Nobody would be opening that anytime soon.

"James?" The word sounded like it was punched out of him. "James, I'm here to take you home."

The other man's heartbeat didn't even fluctuate.

Tony had said the book had been destroyed.

The trigger words should have been impossible to get.

No. Fuck, no.

“James? Please, James.” Percy whispered. “Please.”

And to his utter horror, when James looked up at him, Percy could sense the dark grease paint surrounding his eyes, and when he straightened, the arm attached to his left shoulder was *not* the one Shuri had built.

“Ready to comply.” The Winter Soldier said, devoid of emotion.

Chapter End Notes

i would say that updating early was mercy on you people, but i highly doubt you'll consider this chapter kindness

me: look how PRETTY this place is

me:

me: anyways we're fresh out of bucky-

you guys: can you check in the back

me:

you guys: please

all of you fucking sobbing while reading this:

me jamming out to a playlist called 'one hour of medieval eminem' while writing this:

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Snow

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wednesday, August 15th

11:26 AM

Susitna Hydra Outpost, Alaska

The Asset stared at him.

Percy's heart was slamming into his ribs, like a mangled bird beating its wings inside his chest. "Do you remember?"

Slowly, the Soldier tilted his head. It was a miniscule movement, almost imperceptible, but Percy caught it. He swallowed. "You're not Hydra," He whispered. "Your name is James Barnes. People call you Bucky, it's short for your middle name." Percy's eyes stung. "But I always called you James."

He got no response. Just a flat murmur of, "What is my mission?"

Percy choked on a sob. "There is no mission, James. I'm here to take you home, remember? Back to the tower."

"I am leaving on assignment?"

"No," Percy said wetly. "No, no assignment. No more Hydra. You left them. With Steve, Sam, Natasha. To Wakanda. Then you went to the tower, and you've been staying with me and Tony."

The Soldier stared at him for a long moment. Then his eyes narrowed. "You," He said lowly, "Are not Hydra."

"I'm not." Percy said immediately, shaking his head. "And neither are you."

He barely had time to duck under the punch. The Soldier's swing was swift and unforgiving, and he barely didn't feel it coming. Percy sidestepped another strike, almost clipping the side of his head.

"Traitor," The Soldier said dangerously.

Percy grit his teeth. "No, I'm not. You aren't one of these people, James."

The Soldier snarled, his hand falling to a serrated blade strapped to his thigh. "That's not my name."

Percy squeezed his eyes shut. "I don't want to fight you." He said quietly, tears gathering at the corners of his lashes. He dropped into a loose stance. "But I will."

He was *fast*. Eighty years of training and experience made itself known as the Soldier threw himself at Percy, knife in hand. His swings were precise and controlled, with an alarming amount of power behind them. Percy knew that, if not for his enhanced reflexes, he would probably already be dead.

The Soldier's leg snapped up, kicking Percy in the stomach hard enough to knock the wind out of him. He skidded backwards a few feet, twisting under the punch that came for him next. His hands came up and he grabbed ahold of his fist, the metal creaking slightly under his grip. "James," Percy said, "You need to remember."

He got a headbutt to the nose for his efforts, and blood spouted down his face with a painful *crack*. Percy returned this with a kick of his own, a high roundhouse that smacked him across the side of his head. In the split second of time that got him, Percy jumped up, landing another in the center of his chest.

The Soldier recovered quickly, slamming the side of his metal arm into Percy's ribs, followed up by another swipe of his knife that grazed his cheek. Percy elbowed him in the gut, then wrenched his arm to the side, hitting his wrist hard enough for him to drop the blade, which clattered to the concrete. The Soldier went to grab for it again, and Percy ran at him, slamming into his center and pushing him to the ground.

He rolled off the man immediately, a metal fist slamming into the concrete where his head was

moments ago, leaving a crater behind.

Percy knew that, if it came down purely to hand to hand, he would lose. Demigod or not, the Soldier had leagues of experience on him. Breathing heavy, he wiped at the blood dripping down his chin and put a hand to the ground. He yanked up, and a dozen gallons of groundwater followed his fingertips.

The Soldier halted for just a second, eyeing Percy, reevaluating. Percy's own hands didn't stray for his own weapons, instead letting the water flow in loose ribbons around his forearms and fists. "Your name is James Barnes." He repeated. "Your mom's name was Winnifred, and your father's name was George. You had a little sister. Rebecca."

"No," The Soldier snapped, running at Percy once more. His knuckles slammed right into his diaphragm, followed by an uppercut to his jaw. Percy spat out what was probably blood, and grabbed the Soldier's collar, yanking him down while bringing his knee up, slamming his head into his armored kneecap. Percy shoved a hand out, and the water obeyed, rushing at the man and wrapping around his left arm, forcing it down to his side. He struggled against it, and Percy tightened his stance, jaw clenching.

"You like plums, and reading, and your favorite movie Tony showed you was *Inception*, because you said it made no sense. You cried when you watched Wall-E." He continued. "You peel all the pith off of oranges, even if it takes forever."

"*STOP!*" The Soldier roared. Percy sliced his hand through the air, and more water sank up through the ground, wrapping around his legs and holding him still.

"The first time we really talked, I was in the kitchen eating pizza with whipped cream on top, and you just sat on the counter across from me even though it was the middle of the night."

At that, the Soldier lurched forwards once more, and Percy tugged backwards, the water beginning to solidify to ice.

"I can't sleep when it's cold. Even just a little bit bothers me. Reminds me of cryo."

Bucky's voice rang through his head, and Percy flinched, the water stilling with him. The Soldier made use of his distraction, and his metal knuckles slammed into Percy's temple hard enough for him to momentarily see stars.

Percy groaned, his breathing labored. “Shuri and Ayo gave you books as a parting gift before you left Wakanda. You said they were the most precious possession you own.” He blocked another hit with his forearm, twisting under the arm and grabbing the Soldier and flipping him over onto his back.

The Soldier got to his feet with surprising grace. Tension coiled in each muscle, and Percy could feel the hot blood pumping through his veins.

“Please, James.” Percy said, slowly raising his hands, palms facing inwards. “You need to remember. You’ve worked too hard.”

The man stared up at him from his crouched stance. “My name is not James.”

His heart was beating quickly; not as fast as most would in a fight like this, but Percy could still feel it. Slowly, his fingers curled inwards, his powers brushing against the other man. The sheen of sweat on his skin, the paint around his eyes, every drop of water inside him.

“I don’t want to do this, James. *Please.*” The wind had picked up, slightly, rustling their hair and stinging against exposed skin. “Don’t make me do this,” Percy breathed, eyes wet. “Don’t. Please.”

His powers called to him, *sang* to him. The feeling was almost intoxicating, fingertips hovering over the trigger of someone else’s blood. He could end this, right here, right now. The Soldier’s eyes were wild and hard. Lightning fast, he snatched the knife up from the ground, and lunged at Percy.

“*Nobody’s ever going to control you like that again,*” Percy’s own voice echoed in the back of his mind. He had already broken that promise.

Hydra had done it.

“*Never again.*”

Percy was not like them.

He dropped his hands, just as the Soldier's blade plunged in between two of his ribs, sinking in up to the hilt.

Percy gasped, feeling the knife slip past his skin, deep through the muscle, scraping agonizingly along his bone. The Soldier ruthlessly yanked his blade out, and hot blood streamed down Percy's side. He swayed on his feet, before collapsing forward onto the hard concrete on his knees.

His hands went to the wound, pressing against it, pulse fluttery and hands shaking. "You don't need to do this. You don't need to listen to them, James. Ever again."

A metal hand wrapped around his throat, hauling him up and slamming him against the concrete wall, his head crashing into it painfully. "*That is not my name.*"

Percy coughed, blood coating his lips. "Yes, *it is*. James Buchanan Barnes. You had BARF sessions to get rid of the trigger words. You were so *close*. Your name is James. You like dogs, and prefer coffee over tea, and Tony got you into classic rock." He gasped out.

Above them, snow began falling, light, dusty flakes. The moment one touched his skin, the Soldier jolted, eyes flicking up towards the sky, the sudden cold startling him. When he looked back at Percy, whose hands were wrapped around the fingers digging into his throat, his eyes were unfocused.

"Your name is James." Percy repeated. "Your best friend's name is Steve, and you two got into a fight before you left Wakanda. You told me you still cared about him, and that you hoped the two of you could patch it up. You like petting my dog, Lea, and you—" He let out a breathy sob. "You told me your eyes were blue."

Blue.

A sharp, ripping pain hit the Asset, right in between his eyes, pressing on his skull. He made an aborted, choked noise, hand flying to his forehead, pressing his fingertips to it.

—*This man, standing at a punching bag in the gym a few feet away, knocking over a stack of weights with his foot and pulling Bucky out of a flashback—*

—handing him a plate, staring him down until he ate, watching over him as he fell asleep under a crocheted blanket full of different squares, each colored differently with a different design—

—sitting on the kitchen counter, swinging his legs, wearing a rumpled hoodie and sweats, hair sticking up in every direction, dark circles under his eyes—

Blue.

Like a punch to the gut, he staggers back, releasing the other man's neck. A thousand images flash before his eyes, voices overlapping in his head.

A girl holding a tablet, hair done in elaborate braids, grinning at him and showing him a video on the screen,

A man with a goatee sitting on a gym mat, sweaty and bright eyed, animatedly talking with his hands about the mechanics of a suit,

A woman holding a spear standing next to him in a beautiful library, a slight smile tugging at her lips,

*A blonde man next to him on a couch, comfortable and **familiar**,*

A redhead leaving a small cupcake by his closed door,

A young boy in Hello Kitty pajamas accepting a steaming mug of tea,

And this man, laying next to him, his head on the Soldier's shoulder, eyes closed and breathing even, looking calm and relaxed and content,

This man, standing in front of an assembly, spine straight as he vehemently defended the Soldier,

This man, curled up in a bathroom stall with red eyes, honesty crackling in his voice as he told the Soldier about what happened to him in Ontario,

This man, smiling at the Soldier, again and again, his eyes crinkling and face softening,

*This man, eyes wide and shaky as Bucky asked him to **kill him**.*

Bucky fell to his knees. “You love blue.” He finished, barely audible.

Percy was slumped down against the wall, barely keeping his head up. His hands were pressed against his side, his side where Bucky had driven a knife in between his ribs, had *twisted* and pulled it out.

Bucky lunged towards him, his hands shaky and gentle as they came to cup Percy’s face. “I’m sorry,” He said desperately. “I’m sorry, I’m so, so *sorry*,” His eyes stung, tears coming up freely and falling from his lashes. “You should have killed me. *You said you would kill me if I turned back.*”

Percy’s hand was weak and painted crimson, coming up to overlap Bucky’s. His skin was warm, and the blood it was coated in was warmer. “I promised I would if you were gone.” He smiles at him, that stupid, *stupid* smile, dimples and crinkling eyes, soft and far too kind. “You weren’t gone.”

Bucky’s own body aches, his ribs and chest and head, but everything is overshadowed by deafening static, staring down at Percy. There’s a cut across his cheek, blood flowing down from his nose, and spurting up from between his too red lips. His breathing is shallow and weak. Percy’s eyes are fluttering shut, and his head becomes heavier in Bucky’s hold. His face is growing rapidly pale, all the warm tones leaving his complexion.

“No, no!” Bucky cries out, “Stay awake, alright? You need to stay awake.”

Percy’s lips form words, but no sounds come out. His hand drops to the side, palm facing open on the concrete. Bucky’s thumbs smooth across his cheekbones, trembling. “I—I can’t hear you,” He whispers. “Percy, *please*.”

“The...” Percy coughs, and it’s a terrible, wet sound. “Snow. The snow.”

Bucky looks up. It's falling even heavier now, coating the ground and piling in Percy's hand. It's formed into a scarlet slush against his warm skin, slipping between his fingers. He'd barely even noticed the change in the weather, too focused on the dying man in front of him. Desperation in every move, Bucky looks back to him.

A single snowflake falls onto Percy's cheek, melting on contact, and he watches as the cut on his cheek thins out, skin beginning to knit back together, stretching and pulling as it does so.

Bucky stares, eyes wide and frantic, taking a terrible, too-long moment for him to understand. The breath stolen from him, Bucky grabs at the snow collecting on the frozen concrete with the cold metal of his left hand, Percy cradled in his right. He scoops it up and, after a quick glance at Percy, he presses it to the stab wound.

Again, again, and again, it melts almost immediately and seems to seep right into his skin. He packs Percy's side with snow, and slowly, the color returns to his face. His hand is coated in blood and slush, but he doesn't stop until the bleeding halts to a slow trickle. He's still heavy-limbed and lidded, eyes fluttering shut as Bucky holds onto him.

He's beyond just crying, now, a shaking, sobbing mess. Percy doesn't seem to mind, a hand coming up to rest on the nape of Bucky's neck. "We're alright," He says softly. "We're alright." Bucky leans down, pressing his forehead to Percy's, and lets out a breathy sob. "I'm sorry." He repeats.

"I am too." Percy whispers. "I promised you."

It takes Bucky a second to understand. He shakes his head. "You came to get me." He says. "That's all that matters."

Percy smiles at him again, bloodstained and weak. "Always will."

Behind them, a loud *bang* echoes against the steel door. It's coated over with ice, though spider-web cracks run through it. He can hear angry voices from the other side, and what sounds like a battering ram hitting the door over and over again.

A weak laugh. "That held longer than I thought it would." Percy admits.

Bucky tenses as the ice cracks further. Percy shifts in his hold, pushing himself up so he's sitting up against the wall. He opens his mouth, but Bucky speaks first. "*No*. I'm not leaving you." He says immediately.

Percy's eyes are closed, face tight in obvious pain. Bucky's heart clenches in his chest. "I'm not going to be much help. And we don't have a lot of time. I'll be fine, James." He says. "*Go*."

It's awful, but he's right. Bucky can hear them, dozens of overlapping voices and orders, boots on the ground and hands on deck as they try to break through the barrier. Bucky holds onto him for a moment longer, pulling him into a tight, needy hug. He smells like sweat and metal and blood, but somehow lavender and the sea breeze floats above all that. "I'll be back." He swears. Bucky has to tear himself away from Percy, pushing himself up to stand.

The battering ram slams against the door once more.

He reaches for the holster on his thigh, the only weapon he had on him, only to find it empty. Gleaming in the snow, a bloodied knife seems to stare back at Bucky. He takes a step back. He'd rather go in unarmed.

"James."

Percy's hand is still pressed to his side, and small streams of water are climbing up his side into the wound. His free arm reaches up, and, to Bucky's astonishment, he pulls a sword from a sheath on his back. It's dark metal, razor sharp and double edged. He hands it over hilt first.

Bucky takes it on instinct. The grip is leather, worn but in good condition. It's clearly a well-loved weapon, used and taken care of. "A sword?" Bucky says, eyebrows raised, lips twitched upwards.

"I have a flair for the dramatic." Is all Percy says, grinning despite the pain.

Bucky takes one last look at him. The lower half of his face is coated in blood, half dried onto his skin. There's already a deep bruise forming on his cheek, along with one on his temple that has Bucky cringing. His hands are stained red, now both at his side. But the snow falls gently into his hair, stark white against inky black, and his eyes are gleaming.

They aren't just green. They're every color of the depths of the oceans, the storms and the waves.

Bucky had been right. There truly was something about Percy Jackson that no man could replicate.

Before he leaves, he takes a deep breath. "Thank you." He says soft, voice raw. "Thank you for coming for me." *For believing in me.*

Percy's returning expression was unequivocally genuine. He smiled, bloody. "Any time." Percy swore. And, for some reason, Bucky felt an echo of thunder in the distance.

He swallowed, and wrapped his hand around the hilt of Percy's sword. "I'll be back soon." He promised.

Bucky turned towards the door. His own screams echoed in his ears, overlapped by the cries and pleas of a hundred victims long dead and *Percy*.

Fury ignited in his chest.

Bucky Barnes would *never* be controlled again.

Chapter End Notes

well, uh, here it is! maybe this will help your emotional states. maybe not. idk. just take it.

percy really just THIS ISN'T YOU-d bucky back into having mental will

are you every so gay that you just. loose a fucking fight

BUCKY WITH SWORD BUCKY WITH SWORD

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Hydra's Attack Dog

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wednesday, August 15th

11:34 AM

Susitna Hydra Outpost, Alaska

They didn't even make it into the courtyard.

As soon as the door opened, Bucky was onto them, vicious, coiled fury into every movement. Percy's sword was honed to a perfect edge, and he separated heads from shoulders, stabbed straight through chests and stomachs like it was tissue paper.

The Hydra agents fumbled and grabbed for guns and stun batons.

None of them ever made it that far.

Bucky left a trail of bloodied, ruined bodies behind him, tearing through the entire base on a warpath. Every person that fell, every time he ripped the blade from their bodies, he remembered.

Their cold hands, the way they grabbed at him and sedated him and strapped him to an examination table. They always stood over him, and now he stood over them, watching as they bled out, one by one.

He was an unstoppable, brutal force of their own making, and now they were going to lie in the graves they had dug themselves.

He was their ghost, coming back to haunt them, soundless as his footfalls hit the cold tile, as bodies thumped onto the floor.

Halfway through, sirens started blaring and emergency lights went on. It didn't deter him, not in the slightest, as he crushed a man's windpipe with one hand.

Take care of Hydra. Go back to Percy. Get out of here.

Eighty years of training, and he was about to make *very* good use of it.

He made his way through the entire main building, leaving pools of crimson on the floor, desperate handprints on the floors and walls as stragglers tried to drag themselves away.

Bucky had spent a lot of time around Hydra. There were the soldiers, in dark kevlar and weapons strapped to their bodies. The scientists, gloves and lab coats and emotionless faces. And then there were the others. The leaders.

Starched and pressed collars, silk ties, tailored suit jackets. He knew the type. Men who thought they could rule the world.

Bucky stepped out into the snow once more, this time bathed in the blood of the people who had tortured him for eighty years. Psychologically speaking, it probably shouldn't have been as satisfying as it was, but he didn't care anymore. These people had taken *everything* from him. Once, and then came far too close to doing it a second time.

He ripped his way through the barracks and the mess hall, leaving no survivors behind. Especially nobody who could make it back to the walled-in courtyard to find Percy, injured and sluggish.

Dozens and dozens of guards and scientists, but no man in a suit.

There was *always* a man in a suit.

All the guards from the outer wall had flooded down, running at him in a futile effort. Whether it was by sword or the arm they welded to his skin, it was the last thing they ever did.

He was standing on the grass, out in the open—usually something he would never do, but he knew that there was no threat here. Not anymore. Slowly, Bucky turned his head to the side, looking each way.

Adrenaline coursed through his veins, roaring in his ears. Many words had been used to describe him as the Soldier. Unstoppable. Terrifying. Brutal. A *hunter*.

As he stalked across the frozen grass, nothing had ever fit him more than that last word. He kept his movements silent, ears open and waiting.

Snow still fell, light and fluffy, on his skin and his hair and his dark clothes. It reminded him of those long, dark days, where the sun never seemed to reach him. He blinked, and just for a second, he was in Siberia, surrounded by the corpses of the other Soldiers.

The place was truly deserted.

As he looked around, taking in the tall, concrete buildings, not a single presence made themselves known. The crumpled, lifeless forms of agents pooled out scarlet, adding the only contrast to the landscape.

The place was as empty, as bleak and as lifeless as it had always been. Now, there was just nobody inhabiting it. It seemed right, in a way, to him. Places like these were always hell to him.

Places like these were the death of Bucky Barnes.

It was their turn, now.

The roar of an engine was unexpected, and his head snapped to the side. A black SUV, windows tinted and tires coated with mud, came speeding from behind one of the buildings, towards the open front gates. He could see the man driving, white-knuckling the wheel, face blotchy and red.

His suit was rumpled, like he'd been running.

Good.

Bucky tore after him, quickly gaining on the vehicle. He couldn't get out of the compound. There was no service here, as shown by the distress calls he'd heard sent out that never went through. But outside of the base, he wasn't sure. While taking out Hydra in a bloody massacre was most certainly long overdue, he also had an injured friend he needed to get out.

Bucky put on another burst of speed, only a few feet away from the vehicle.

Then, the gates shut.

Of their own accord, the large panels of metal and barbed wire moved in, closing the gap in the walls. It was sudden, too sudden, and there was no time to brake. The SUV hit the steel with a loud *crunch*.

The front of the car crumpled like it was made of aluminum foil and not thick, plated metal. The hood was crunched up, the windshield shattered, one of the side mirrors broken clean off and laying in the snow. The airbags had gone off, and smoke filled the air in a thick smog.

Bucky stalked up to the driver's side, ripping the door right off the car and tossing it aside.

He grabbed the man inside by the collar, yanked him out of the car and tossed him to the ground. He hit the snow, skin smeared with blood from a cut on his forehead. The suited man groaned, pushing himself up onto his elbows. Bucky stood over him, Percy's blade pointed at his heart.

The man looked up at him. His hair was graying at the temples and roots, and had a clean shaven face. Cold, pale green eyes, and a weak chin. He looked up at Bucky, face drawn. Bucky could see in his eyes, he knew there was no way out of this one.

"You know, we were originally going to use Rogers." Was all he said.

A beat. "Excuse me?"

"For the simulation. We all know how close you two are. But you didn't scream for him." The man shook his head, a breathy laugh erupting from him, all smug, vindictive pleasure. "You didn't scream for him. You screamed for a man named *Percy*. It wasn't hard to figure out who you meant."

Bucky saw red. "You don't get to say his name." He snarled.

"Why?" He taunted, glee in every word. "Did you finally figure it out? That he was one of us? Did

you *kill him?*”

“He tricked you, you dumb piece of shit.” Bucky replied with a vicious, unhinged smile. “You ate that all up, didn’t you? You really thought that he could be *anything* like you.”

The man stared up at him, sweat running down his collar, the realization sinking in. Then, “You’ll never be anything more than Hydra’s attack dog.” He spat venomously.

Bucky regarded him coldly. A few months ago, the words would have rung true. But now, he thought back to reading with Shuri, sparring with Ayo, talking with Tony, and laughing with Percy. Instead, he just stared down at this man, who seemed so, so insignificant now.

“But since I am a dog,” Bucky quoted, “Beware my fangs.”

Without remorse nor hesitation, he drove the point of the blade into the man’s chest, and ripped it out, leaving the blood to pool and dye his white shirt red.

Blade at his side, Bucky tilted his head up to the wall. More specifically, the guard tower right next to the gate. Two people stood atop it, and he watched as they climbed down the ladder onto the ground. As soon as they let go of the rungs, their hands were up.

He let them approach, chin tilted up and eyes critical. They were wearing dark clothes like the guards, but lacking any of the armor or weapons.

They were teenagers.

A girl, tall and narrow, curls tied back in a braid. Next to her, a boy, closely cropped hair and lanky limbs. They were shaking. Standing close to each other, likely for comfort.

“You closed the gate.” His voice was rough, raspy. The boy flinched. “We—” He swallowed. “Yes.”

“Why?” He said, voice low and dangerous.

“Mr. Lewis didn’t deserve to have the gate open.” The girl said, setting her jaw in defiance despite the shake in her hands.

Bucky eyed the two of them for a moment longer. Then he nodded. “Come with me.” He said flatly, spinning on his heel. He didn’t have to check to know they were following. It was cruel, but he led them back through the halls, let them see the blood and the bodies. They were young, but they were Hydra. A warning was needed.

He stopped by the door to the courtyard. “Stay here. If you try anything, you’ll be dead before you hit the ground.” He said darkly. They exchanged nervous looks, and Bucky strode into the courtyard.

Percy was still sitting where he left him, head tipped back against the wall. As Bucky drew near, he gave him a weak smile. “I called Tony.”

Bucky crouched down, cupped the side of his jaw and tilted his head side to side, checking over for bumps with his other hand. “I thought there was no service here.” He commented. The back of Percy’s head was a *mess*. There was a cut that stretched across his skin, and a truly worrying area that was already swollen.

Guilt ripped through him like a bullet.

“It’s *Tony*.” Percy replied easily. Bucky huffed goodnaturedly. “Fair enough.”

Percy hummed, leaning his head into Bucky’s hand. “Why are Tara and Noah here?”

Tara and Noah. Bucky’s face tightened. “They’re teenagers, Perce. They shut the gate so Lewis couldn’t get out, too. Surrendered after that.”

Percy’s face darkened, as it always did when kids were involved in their work. “Tony’s bringing a quinjet around in fifteen. They coming back with us?”

Bucky cast a glance over his shoulder, at the two teens huddled up next to each other, shoulders drawn in. “I...I guess.” He most definitely wasn’t leaving them here, for sure.

That got him a strained smile. “Good.”

He shifted, moving to sit up against the wall next to Percy, who was leaning on him rather heavily. There was still rivulets of water moving unnaturally upwards, crawling up his side and seeping into the wound. It was sluggish, slow. Too slow, he was afraid. Bucky watched, silent.

It was freezing cold out, and he *hated* it, especially when he could see the splatters of scarlet staining the white blanket covering the ground, and most of it wasn't *his*. But he didn't dare move Percy.

Bucky sent up a silent prayer for Tony to hurry up.

The quinjet touched down right in the center of the courtyard, sending up a flurry of snow around it. Bucky shielded his eyes, and Percy turned his face into Bucky's shoulder. As soon as the bay doors opened, Tony was skidding out, the suit formed around him but the helmet off.

He dropped to his knees in front of the two of them, taking in their bloodied appearances. “What happened?” He demanded, moving to Percy as he quickly took in Bucky's relatively uninjured state.

The look on his face must have said it all, and Tony went white. “Percy?” He said softly, shaking the man with a gentleness Bucky had never seen. Percy groaned slightly. “‘m fine.” He mumbled.

Tony shook his head, and got to his feet. “We need to get him to the tower. Anything you need to take care of here?”

Bucky's eyes didn't leave Percy's face. “Noah! Tara!” He yelled out. The two shuffled out of the doorway, apprehensive. Tony gave them a onceover, and inhaled sharply. “God, they look Peter's age.” He shook his head. “Right. Everybody in! Let's go!”

They both helped Percy to his feet, Bucky taking the brunt of his weight as they walked up the ramp into the jet. It was blissfully warm, and Bucky let out a silent breath. Tara and Noah, still silent, sat in the seats Tony pointed to without argument.

On its own, the quinjet doors raised and sealed shut, and the engines started, smoothly lifting up and beginning to ascend. The armor seemed to bleed off of Tony, practically disappearing off of him as he leaned over Percy.

“What happened to him?” Tony asked sharply as Bucky lowered Percy into a seat of his own. Percy coughed. “I’m right here, dickhead. Stab wound in my right side, and a definite concussion. Bruised ribs, probably.”

“Jesus,” Tony hissed, tugging at his hair. “Help me get the suit off of him.”

Bucky complied instantly. He’d never seen Percy in it before—it was black armor, molded to him perfectly. Underneath, a deep red layer that zipped up to his throat. It was relatively easy to tug off, undoing each of the armor pieces and unzipping the underlayer down far enough to expose his side.

The wound looked worse than Bucky could’ve imagined. The cut itself was already half-healed, but the amount of blood, some dried and some not, surrounding it made him sick. His hands stilled over it, shaking.

Tony’s eyes flicked up to him. “Sit down, Barnes. I got this.”

It took a moment for the words to get through, but once they did, Bucky nodded and sat down, careful not to jostle Percy, even as his head came to rest on Bucky’s thigh. He watched as Tony did his best to wipe away all the blood from his side, pressing gauze over the wound itself and taping it closed.

Percy’s jaw clenched every time Tony touched his side, no matter how brief or how lightly. Gently, he brushed a loose strand of Percy’s hair out of his face. “You alright?” He asked quietly.

The other man let out a huff of breathy laughter that Bucky knew had to make his ribs feel like hell. “I think you broke my nose.” He admitted.

Bucky tilted his head, trying to get a better look at his blood-coated face. In a flash, the memory of slamming his forehead into Percy’s face, the painful sounding *crack* that came afterwards. He flinched. “Yeah, I think I did too.”

Percy reached up and patted his arm, even as Tony smacked him and hissed at him to stay still. ““S alright.” He said. “I think I broke your ribs.”

Bucky grunted slightly. “You hit really hard.”

Percy honest to God *giggled*, and it had no right to be as cute as it was. “Sorry.”

Bucky ran a light hand through his across his head. It was matted with blood. “I think I’ll find it in myself to forgive you.” His voice dropped. “I’m...God, Perce, *I’m* sorry.”

That got him another pat on the arm. “Wasn’t you.” Percy’s tone was final, leaving no room for arguments.

After that, they fell into tense silence. Bits and pieces of the last hours—hours? Had it been hours? Days? It could have been *weeks*, and Bucky would have had no idea. That was one of the worst parts. Never knowing if it had been a few minutes since he was last conscious, or years.

One of the worst parts.

The worst, by far, was *this*.

Bucky would never be able to forget how Percy looked, fallen to his knees and coughing up his own blood, the handle of Bucky’s knife sticking out of his side. He remembered how he’d felt the blade scrape against his ribs, sickening and shudder-inducing. He recalled how he twisted the blade and ripped it out without a single flash of feeling.

Even as he stared at the floor beneath his feet, his hand remained atop Percy’s head, his ears focused on his breathing. Shallow, but steady.

Bucky was listening to the roar of the engines as they flew away from Alaska, away from the base and the bloodbath he’d left behind. Towards home. He could see the ocean out the window, vast and blue.

Bucky was listening.

He was listening, and he noticed immediately when Percy's breath stuttered, and when the hand that was resting on Bucky's knee suddenly went limp.

Chapter End Notes

you guys for the last, like, six chapters: percy should go feral on the hydra base
me, enlightened: BUCKY going on a murder spree

bc yeah percy going nuts is always fun, but bucky, full of righteous vengeance, killing
the people who taught him to kill,,,turning those skills against the people who forced
them onto him,,,freeing himself from their control in a flurry of blood and
steel,,,,good shit, if i do say so myself.

bucky's little pre-murder quote was shakespeare, btw. its from the merchant of venice,
and goes

"Thou calledst me dog before thou hadst a cause.
But since I am a dog, beware my fangs."

bucky, upon finding two teenagers in a hydra base: i feel the paternal instinct coursing
through my veins

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Home

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Thursday, August 16th

5:32 AM

Stark Tower, NY

Percy Jackson woke up seeing nothing.

This was not the first time this had happened—it wasn't even the most *alarming* time that this had happened.

Anything, he'd say if asked, was better than the first. Like it was yesterday, he could still smell the sulfur in the air, feel the way his lungs were scraped raw by the acrid environment. The rough ground, sharp rocks digging into his back and neck. Like it had just happened, Percy could remember how it *burned*.

The skin around his eyes had practically melted, a raw and bloody mess. Moving his face hurt, touching it hurt, the *air* hitting it hurt.

Compared to the first time, this was nothing.

The infirmary was cooled to a pleasant temperature, the mattress underneath him was soft, and there was a blanket laying atop him. He could feel the bandages wrapping around his head, plastered across his cheek, and taped against his side.

And, in sharp contrast to the first time, he wasn't alone.

As Percy pushed himself up onto his elbows, James shot awake. His heart skittered and jumped as he caught sight of Percy. "Oh, my God." James whispered, sounding so truly and utterly *wrecked* that Percy felt his heart squeeze. He reached out, like he wanted to hold onto Percy, to reassure himself that he was truly there, but jerked back when he got close to him, guilt flashing across his face.

Percy didn't hesitate in grabbing him by the shirt and yanking him forward into a hug. He smelled like pine and old spice, the scent of gunpowder and blood scrubbed away from his skin. Bucky's arms automatically came up, one braced against the mattress to keep himself from crushing Percy, the other looping around his shoulders.

"Are you okay?" Percy asked against his chest. "Is everything alright?"

Bucky laughed, and it sounded like he was holding back tears. "Am *I* okay? Percy, I *stabbed* you. It—it went in between your ribs, it almost punctured your *lung*. I," He choked off. "I almost killed you."

Percy pulled away slightly, his hand moving to the side of Bucky's face. "That," He said fiercely, "Was *not* you. None of that was on you. If anybody, it's my fault. I was the one who dropped you off at the Hub. I was the one who didn't realize Anev—" He cut off, face tight.

Bucky drooped slightly. "Yeah, Tony told me." He said quietly. "I'm sorry."

"Again," Percy sighed. "Not your fault."

He knew Bucky's eyes flickered down to his heavily bandaged side. He opened his mouth, like he wanted to say something, then shook his head. "I should tell your doctor you're awake." He said suddenly, pushing his chair back and standing up. "I—bye."

As he walked away, Percy could feel him scrubbing at his damp cheeks.

Dr. Cho was nice. Percy had only met her a few times when she had first begun to treat Dan. She was a good doctor. Kind. She checked him over with a swift, easy manner, one that was telling of many years of practice. She looked at the cuts on the back of his head, the one on his face, his side. She watched and listened as he took deep, exaggerated breaths to ensure his lungs were alright. He sat perfectly still as she shined a light in his eyes.

She spoke carefully, voice soft. "You'll be able to get your stitches out in two weeks. Whenever you're free."

He nodded easily. They would be a pain in the ass, sure, and they itched like hell, but he'd had worse.

Percy felt it as her breath hitched slightly, looking down at her chart. "I'm sure you've noticed—"

He nodded. "Yeah, I figured it out myself." He said ruefully.

Dr. Cho swallowed thickly. "It'll probably come back."

Percy leaned back against the headboard. "Maybe." He agreed, but it was evident in his voice that he didn't believe her.

—

According to Tony, he'd been out for almost eighteen hours.

"On the quinjet," The man said, oddly somber. "You just...passed out. We couldn't wake you up." He murmured. "You wouldn't even *move*."

Percy laid back on his cot, facing up at the ceiling. "How far were we?"

The question got him a puzzled look, but Tony answered anyway. "We'd only been flying for about two-hundred miles. Why?"

He just shrugged. "Curious." Percy said blandly.

Tony nodded tightly. "Anything you need—"

Percy gave him a weak smile. "I know. Thanks, Tony."

His mom came to visit, Paul, Estelle, and Lucas not even a full step behind her. Lucas was riding on Paul's shoulders, and Estelle was skipping along in front of them. He smiled as soon as he heard them coming up in the elevator.

"Oh, baby," His mother exclaimed as soon as she saw him, throwing her arms around him and pressing a kiss to his forehead. He leaned into her, relaxing. "I'm alright, *Mãe*. Always am."

She smoothed a hand over his face, nails scratching lightly across his skin. "And yet," She said softly, "I'll always worry."

Behind her, Estelle and Lucas, seemingly having enough of being held back, launched themselves onto his bed. Lucas latched onto his uninjured side, and Estelle pulled herself into his lap.

"*Hey, guys.*" He said with a soft smile.

Estelle was looking at him, her nose scrunched up and an intense look on her face. "*Are you hurt? Why are you in a hospital? And why is it so fancy?*" She demanded.

He laughed, ignoring the way it made his stitches pull and ribs ache. "*I'm fine, estrela. I'm just resting here for a bit.*" He dropped his voice low, a mock whisper. "*And my friend owns this hospital. He owns a lot of fancy things.*"

She squealed in delight. "*Does he have a castle?*"

Percy opened his mouth, denial on the tip of his tongue, but stopped. "*You know what? He just might. He's a bit fun like that.*"

Lucas had remained silent, staring up at him with wide eyes. While Estelle turned to Paul to make sure he heard about Tony's possible castle, he ran a soothing hand down his brother's back. "*Everything is fine, kid.*"

The boy stared a moment longer, then nodded, seeming to accept Percy's words.

Paul clapped a hand on Percy's shoulder, careful not to jostle him. "She's been stress baking." He informs, looking over at Percy's mother. "The kids have eaten so much cookie dough, I think their tongues are still blue." Percy snorts slightly, a smile curling up onto his lips. "There are worse things."

He can feel Paul's eyes on him, heavy. "Yeah," The man says softly. "There are."

He's cleared to leave the next day. He takes a long, warm shower, the water loosening up the tenseness in his shoulders.

It's not that different, he tells himself. You've been through this before.

You can do it again.

The water runs down his side, but he carefully diverts it from his stitches. Sure, he could heal it right then, take the stitches out himself, not have to deal with the itching and the stinging and the way they pulled at his skin when he moved.

But over the years, Percy had found out that his unnatural healing was not without its drawbacks. When a wound went deep enough, down to the dermis, collagen fibers formed to heal it. When Percy introduced water to an open wound, it sped up the process a thousand times, always ending in a scar more visible than it would have been if he had let it heal normally.

Scars didn't bother him that much anymore. He'd been collecting them since he was a kid.

But he didn't want anything to remind him of what had happened in Alaska, not when he could avoid them. Not when he already had a constant reminder, one that was so, so permanent.

Percy went to work alone.

The SWORD members wouldn't come to work for the next two weeks. Percy had given them all time off.

He went to the office alone. He righted the overturned chairs, scrubbed Anev's blood from the carpet. As he did so, Lee's angry screams and the sounds of his knuckles meeting Anev's face rang through his ears.

He did the paperwork for Anev's termination.

And then their incarceration.

For the second time in his life, seven had become six.

He finds Bucky on the balcony, looking over the city. The Soldier's arm had been taken off since he'd last talked to him, leaving him standing slightly off balance. Percy stands directly on his left, taking up the empty space.

For some reason, this makes Bucky wince.

It's warm out, the air humid in the late August heat. A slight breeze blows across their faces, brushing along hair and skin, smelling of clean air. It had rained here, he was told, all while he was in the infirmary. He'd just missed it, apparently.

The sun is beginning to make its departure as Artemis readies her chariot, hitching up the silver-antlered deer that pull it across the night sky. Percy leans on the railing, the sounds of the distant city below all turning into one massive song that meets his ears.

"I tried not to think about it."

Percy's breathing stills. "What?"

Bucky is facing down, his hair curtaining in front of his face. "I tried not to think about what I did to you. But...not think about you?" He shook his head. Bucky's voice is barely a whisper, filled to the brim with an emotion Percy can't put a name to. "I don't think I know how to do anything else."

"James—" Percy starts.

"Don't. Don't try to make me feel better. *Please.*" He says raggedly. "Brain damage, Percy. I did that. Maybe not my mind, but my hands, my body." His shoulders shudder. "And the worst part? I don't remember hitting you that hard. I don't remember knocking you out like Cho described. I hurt you like that, and I can't even *remember it.*"

Percy squeezes his eyes shut, his chin tipping down towards his chest. He hadn't wanted to tell James. He wasn't planning on it. But then he found out how they did it, and now, listening to his destroyed voice, he knows that between telling him and letting him continue on like this, there really isn't a choice at all.

It takes far too much effort to find his voice. "You didn't." He rasps out. "You don't remember, because you *didn't.*"

Bucky is already shaking his head. "Percy, I can't do this. Please don't lie to me."

"James. Listen, please." Percy replied. "Just...listen."

He shifts slightly, and Percy knows he has his attention. He runs his forefinger over the back of his thumb as he speaks, voice distant. "I'm not an Enhanced. Not in the way people think." And just like that, a thousand pounds of weight begins to fall off his shoulders. "I'm a Greek demigod, like the ones of myth. The Sea God Poseidon is my father."

Bucky stares at him. He looks at Percy, who's silhouetted against the sunset, a striking profile. Percy, whose face is so incredibly symmetrical. Perfectly proportioned, like a piece of art, not somebody real and tangible. How his eyes truly are unlike any others, in a way Bucky has never been able to put into words.

He has a descriptor now. *Celestial.*

“It’s real. All of it. Gods, Titans, Giants, Monsters. Everything.” And there’s an undeniably haunted chord in his voice as he speaks, one that leaves no room for doubt.

“Monsters?” Bucky echoes numbly. He’d read a book on mythology when he was a child. He remembers flipping through it, staring at the illustrations and the descriptions, and being so terrified that he’d slammed it shut and shoved it into the returns bin. It’s all a bit hazy with time, but he can recall reading of being with the size and power of mountains, things with wide maws and a thousand razor-like teeth, things that, by all accounts, could not *die*.

He remembers, and as he looks at the expression on Percy’s face, something quietly clicks into place.

“There are these beings. The *Morai*.” When Percy says it, it doesn’t just sound like a name. It sounds like something deeper, impossible for Bucky to fully grasp.

“The Three Fates.” He says.

Percy nods. “They represent birth, life, and death. They are instruments of balance.” He explains. “They carry yarn, spun to represent a life. When they cut it, the person to whom it belongs dies. Just like that. From your first to last moments, they spin your yarn.”

Just the concept of it is sobering. His life, everything he’s done, all the impact he’s had, condensed down into a single thread.

“You were supposed to die yesterday.”

Ice fills Bucky’s veins. “What?” He croaks.

“They were going to cut your string.” He reiterates. “I appealed to them. They liked what I had to say, I suppose.”

Bucky feels like he’s been punched in the gut. “What aren’t you telling me, Percy?”

The demigod scrubs a hand across his face. “Like I said,” He says softly. “Balance. Take and give.

You can't have something for nothing."

A thousand things run through Bucky's mind. The tortured faces of those depicted in the Fields of Punishment, screaming and wailing for help that would never come. He'd always thought that Greek Mythology was harsh. Never had it hit him as hard as it did now.

"Percy," He whispers. "What did you do?"

A grounding breath. "Alaska is the land beyond the Gods. They have no power there. The Fates are a different kind, but they are Gods all the same. They can't interfere beyond the strings." Percy's nails dig into his palms. "Tony said I passed out just as we started flying over the ocean. Cho said that passing out was from brain damage that didn't actually happen."

And slowly, realization marbled with horror sinks in.

As soon as Percy had been back in the God's domain, it had happened. Not when the Soldier was hurting him, not when Bucky had left him in the courtyard.

It had happened as soon as they had left Alaska.

He had bargained with the Fates to bring him home.

Percy had traded the rest of his sight for Bucky's life.

All that he could get out was a mangled, broken, "Why?"

Percy's brow knitted slightly, face turned towards the horizon. "Why?" He echoed. "That's a difficult question." He props up his chin with his palm. "I've made a lot of hard decisions in my life. Ones that I still turn over and over in my head, wondering if I chose right. So it means all the more when I tell you, James, that was the easiest choice I've ever made. Maybe that's why." He blinks, the golden glow of the dusk reflecting off his eyes. "I traded something I didn't need for something I did." Percy nods to himself; a small, quick movement. "Maybe I just needed you more."

Bucky, in all his years, has never felt more exposed than he did right now. “I don’t deserve it.” He got out. “I don’t deserve to be something you need.”

Percy didn’t turn to face him. “Life has nothing to do with deserving, James. We both know that.” His voice takes on a softer quality. “And, besides, I beg to differ.”

How can he? How can Percy see this any differently than him, when Bucky was the reason he lost so *much*?

The demigod lets go of the railing, standing up straight. “I don’t regret it. Not for a second. If I could, I’d do it again and again. However many times it took. Because, James,” He says his name like it’s something soft, something *precious*. “My world was never splatters of light, motion, and color. Those things don’t mean anything to me. Not compared to the people I love.” He does turn towards Bucky, now, and his face is so open, so painfully earnest. “You, James Barnes, are a *thousand* times better than colors. Better than blue, I think.”

You love blue.

Forgetting was always Bucky’s biggest fear.

For good reasons.

But when he was the Soldier, he remembered Percy. He saw him for who he truly was, saw the memories and the smiles and the laughter and the *love* connected to him. It had terrified the Asset.

But not Bucky.

And he knew, no matter what happened, he would never forget those words.

Bucky’s hand found its way up to cup his cheek, lashes wet. He stared at Percy; amazing, wonderful, kind Percy.

“I never forgot you.” He finds himself confessing. “When I was the Soldier, I knew, I *knew* I was missing something.”

Percy's lips part in surprise.

"It was like there was a part of me that I had left behind. It hurt, in my chest and my throat. It *ached*." He said, torn open and exposed. "I guess you were just too amazing to forget."

Percy's warm palm rests on the back of his neck. "I'm not that great." He says, barely audible. "I'm reckless, and stubborn, and *incredibly* stupid."

Bucky's face creases in protest. "Stupid?"

He watches, only inches away, as Percy's lower lips tremble. When he speaks, it's like an exhale, like he's saying something that is beyond words, as if it's a confession that had been months in the making. "Stupid enough to fall in love with a man marked for death."

Something Bucky's mother used to say; love was a language of its own, that lived not in your head but in your heart.

It was no wonder he could never forget Percy Jackson.

Bucky Barnes has always been smart. He always thought before he said anything, running words through his head. But now, they just slip out, and Bucky knows, in that moment, he has never said *anything* more true. "Well, I guess I'm a damn fool too, for falling for someone as loving, and as kind, as caring and as loyal as you. I'm pretty fucking stupid for falling in love with somebody who deserves *so much* better than me."

Percy's lips part, soft and pink. "Better than you?" He whispers, like he can't believe it. Then, his mouth curls upwards into that crooked grin that's imprinted into Bucky's brain. He can feel Percy's breath on his skin, his words leaving warm marks on him that will never fade. "I'll believe it when I see it."

Bucky laughs. It's loud, full and warm, and Percy is smiling at him like it's the best thing he's ever heard.

And then, Percy is pulling him in, and Bucky is leaning down to capture Percy in a kiss.

The idea of something being perfect was foreign to Bucky. There were things that were good, great, even, like tea made just the way he enjoyed it, the way a weapon fit in his palm, the way he felt when the sun shone on his skin. Perfect didn't exist. Perfect was impossible.

His ribs ached something fierce, his left arm had been torn off of him, and every waking moment had been soaked in guilt and grief so fierce it left him gasping for breath.

Love wasn't about *perfect*. Love was about, just for a second, making all that go away.

And when he kissed Percy, there was nothing on his mind but the man right in front of him. The hand that cupped the back of his neck, the other that rested on his chest, burning heat through layers of cloth and skin, down to his very core. Just for a second, the world narrowed to this moment, right here, and nothing else.

This moment, how Percy's lips tasted like citrus and the sweet tea he'd been drinking, how Percy practically melted under his touch, how his blunt nails felt against his scalp. The soft, wrecked noise that hissed between his teeth, how Percy's eyes fluttered shut. How it turned Bucky's blood molten, warming him from the inside out, drawing out the chill that had lived in his bones for eighty years.

And he knew that Hydra could *never* make something up like this.

Even as they broke apart, Bucky's forehead stayed pressed against Percy's. He took in the flush on his cheeks, the raw, unfiltered expression on his face, barely a sliver of space between their lips. He dragged his thumb across Percy's cheekbone, and only then Bucky realized he was crying.

Percy's calloused fingertips—the fingertips of a musician, a warrior, a leader,—ghosted along Bucky's cheek, drawing the saltwater away.

It felt like home.

Chapter End Notes

LETS FUCKING GO GAYS

i put in so much work making this as homoerotic as possible and i really hope it lives

up to your expectations

so yeah!! that was the bargain with the fates. percy offered up 'anything that was his to give', and sacrificed the remainder of his eyesight. and the thing was, it was getting better. years in the future, he could have had his full sight back. he gave up a life of seeing for a life for bucky. aww, or whatever

and the second he left alaska, the passing out was the fates doing their thing

no asking people out we go straight to confessing our love like men

coughs discreetly look at the relationship tags

epilogue will drop, and then it's sequel time babey!!!!

(PS: percy absolutely did get a god's blessing to tell bucky about the godly world without him Fucking Dying, and it was aphrodite 100%)

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Epilogue Part 1: National News

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He knew they were watching.

The weight of a thousand stares was almost tangible, pressing down on his shoulders and making him straighten his spine. His shirt was neatly pressed, tie knotted at his throat, pants devoid of a single wrinkle.

The white cane in his hands clacked along the dark wood floor, echoing sharply around the chamber.

The summons he had received had been terribly unspecific.

To discuss recent events.

Percy had scoffed, rolling his eyes when he'd received it. The letter was sitting in the bottom of a trash can, now, crumbled up into a little ball. He'd been a little tempted to not show up, but ultimately had decided it was for the best.

The meeting wasn't held in the WSC building—a tactful choice on their part. Especially after what had happened last time he'd stepped foot into the chamber. Instead, it was in the Senate, though the typical attendance roster had changed dramatically.

When Percy walked in, a few familiar people jumped out at him. A few of the Council members, Willa Hanover sitting in front of them all. A handful of reporters he'd never met but had been around when they were getting Bridgette her fake press pass for the testimony.

It didn't set him on edge, but it certainly didn't soothe him either.

President Alexander Landry sat in the middle of the room, imposing and drawing the attention of everyone else in the room. Percy strode to the center of the floor, hands at his side, silent as the metaphorical grave. Waiting.

“Commander Jackson.” The man finally said, after it became clear Percy did not plan on addressing him.

Percy raised a sole, expectant eyebrow.

“You have done your country well.” The man praised, bravado lacing his voice. “Your service will be remembered, with highest honors.” Around them, a dozen camera shutters went off. The President turned to address the crowd. “Today, Commander Jackson is here to receive an award of the highest merit, for his unwavering dedication to the American people.”

A smattering of applause.

“I’m sorry,” Percy said, letting confusion overshadow his words. “Award? I was under the impression that we were here to discuss reparations.”

That brought a hush upon the onlookers. He felt Landry’s muscles tense beneath his skin. “Reparations? For what?” The man asked, voice off-kilter and odd like Percy was asking something out of the blue.

He tipped his chin up. “The Enhanced, sir, and their families.”

Suddenly, everything was silent. It was quiet before, the soft mutterings of cameramen as they adjusted their microphones, the wispy scratching of a pencil on paper, the slight whisper of fabric as someone shifted in their seat. Now, though, it was truly and fully silent, as if he had said something truly taboo.

Percy tried not to let his jaw clench.

“Enhanced, Commander?” The President echoed, and it was impossible for Percy to ignore the tightness in his shoulders, the slight warning carried in his voice.

He blinked. “Oh,” Percy said, genial confusion coloring his words. “This isn’t about Thaddeus Ross? My apologies, sir.”

At the name, a thousand murmurs rose, coating the air and rising upwards to the ceiling like a thick cloud of smoke. And Percy had just lit the very first match.

“Secretary Ross?” A Councilwoman said from the back. “Should he not be here, if this pertains to him?”

The President inclines his head towards her slightly, and Percy can practically hear the redirection building on his tongue. He, too, shifted slightly to face her. He had no plans of letting the attention be driven away from this.

“There must have been some terrible miscommunication.” Percy informed her, words careful and gentle, as if he came bearing particularly bad news. “Secretary Ross is dead.”

An instant roar overtook the chamber, clambering voices speaking, yelling, demanding, one atop the other. Percy stood there, white-knuckling his cane, face stony, until it died down to a manageable level.

As soon as he opened his mouth to speak, the cacophony of words fell to a hush, not one willing to miss what he said next. As professionally and detached as he could, Percy continued. “My team and I uncovered his true allegiance as a Hydra agent on the date of August the fourteenth. We took immediate action. He was killed not six hours later.”

“You—” The President cut himself off. “You admit to having the Secretary of State *killed*? ” There was anger laying the foundations of his voice, and bewilderment was layered atop.

Percy tilted his head. “You put in the order yourself, Mr. President, for any active Hydra combatants to be put to death immediately, by those who have the authority.” And not a single person here could deny that was his team. Working directly for the WSC, involved if not *leading* any sort of operation involved the organization. “Or did I misinterpret that?” He said lightly, a challenge written in between the lines.

“I’m sorry,” Landry said, staring Percy down as if waiting for him to retract his words. “Are you attempting to spread the message that the Secretary of State himself was a Hydra agent?”

Instead of backing down, he plunged forward. “...Yes.” He said it a tad slower than previous, as if believing that the man truly didn’t understand. “I detailed this all in my report, along with the

substantial evidence we had uncovered.” Then, he frowned. “It is far from circumstantial, sir. I actually have a copy, right here, if you would like to give it a look.”

That set off two very different reactions—first, indignation simmered up from the Council at the fact that Landry’s administration had not forwarded the report to them. Second, from the rest of the spectators, shock that the man apparently hadn’t even read it.

Percy knew he had. He knew in the way Landry showed no shock at the news Percy delivered, other than annoyance and, as he refused to drop it, anger.

But it was either pretend he had not read a vital piece of information he was given, or pretend that his own administration was so incompetent that it somehow had not gotten to him in the first place—something which would most definitely be disproved.

“No, no. That’s unnecessary. I’m sure I have it somewhere.” Landry quickly replied, a bead of sweat going down his neck.

“Mr. Jackson—”

“Commander.” Percy corrected.

Landry grit his teeth. “*Commander*,” He bit out. “You seem to be a tad confused as to the events that transpired the last few days—”

Percy shook his head, obstinate. “No, I don’t think so. Could you explain to me where the lack of understanding was? Perhaps I can clear things up.” He said helpfully, firmly pushing down the smile that tried to rise up on his face.

To his left, Councilman Graves slammed his hands down onto the wooden table. “This is *ridiculous!*” He exclaimed loudly. “Commander, it is understood that you wish to bring attention to the conditions of the Enhanced, but to go this far is utterly ridiculous! Embellishing statements and falsehoods in front of a representative of every major news outlet in North America? Have some respect.” He pronounced, anger twisting his features.

Percy took in a calming breath through his nose. A perfectly pleasant look on his face, he inclined his head towards Graves. “Well, that’s the thing, Councilman. I was unaware this was going to be a

public event. I came prepared for a private conference, and had talking points appropriate for that situation. If I had been given a notice that this, in fact, was not going to be closed-doors, I would have certainly come prepared for a different situation.”

Surprise rolled across the crowd in waves. “You were unaware this was going to be broadcasted?” Hanover asked, an edge to her voice.

He didn’t hesitate to throw Landry under the bus. “I was not, ma’am. The only details I received were the date and time of my summons. I assumed it was to discuss reparations to the families of the Enhanced that suffered under Thaddeus Ross’s hand. At the time, I could not think of any other reason for the President himself wanting to speak with me.”

The low murmuring of the news teams met his ears, and he disguised a smirk into his shoulder. It would seem entirely innocent on his part, but now the idea that Landry had not even considered reparations to the Enhanced and their families would be out there. Instead of trying to fix things, he had called in a man, stuck him in front of every news channel on the continent without his consent, and gave him an award that held no weight behind it.

Hanover slowly turned towards the President. “Now,” She said icily. “I am not quite sure what type of place you are running here, Mr. President, but this is a long way past ridiculous. I would never allow such an oversight to happen on my watch.” She slipped off her glasses, took her time cleaning them on her sleeve. Once she slid them back onto her nose, Hanover continued. “I cannot fathom the incompetence that would be required for such an erroneous mistake. In fact, one may even say that it seems intentional.”

Oh, he was sending her a *huge* gift basket when this was all over.

She went on. “More and more this is beginning to seem like an attempt to hide *something*, Landry. Now, I’m giving you the benefit of a doubt, here, but my goodwill is fading fast.” She warned.

He scoffed. “You speak of a conspiracy, Willa. I urge you to calm yourself.” Percy raised an eyebrow, mouth falling open slightly. Landry turned towards the group of cameras and the teams behind them. “I admit there must have been some sort of miscommunication, however there was no malicious intent as Councilwoman Hanover is clearly and unjustly implying.” He reassured them.

Hanover’s fists tightened into balls underneath the tabletop. Percy was half expecting her to leap up and sock the President in the nose, honestly. And as entertaining as that would be, he wasn’t quite finished yet.

“What is the award for?” He inquired.

Landry seemed rather thrown off. “Your service.” He got out.

Percy brushes a strand of hair out of his face with an easy flick of his finger. Like a shark smelling blood in the water, he smiles. “Which part?” He asks. “Because, let’s see, Mr. President. In the last year alone, I have emptied out a Hydra human experimentation facility, dissolved an Enhanced child trafficking ring, shut down another Hydra compound, and, most recently, aided in the return of noted war hero James Barnes.” He says this offhandedly, counting off his fingers.

The furious scratch of pencils on paper comes from the cordoned off area for the reports.

“I also, with the help of my team, weeded out a high-ranking Hydra official from your own administration. Need I remind the congregation, this is the man responsible not only for *all* the things I have mentioned so far, but in addition, the attempted assassination of Sergeant Barnes, where the WSC building was breached and one of my own ended up in the ICU, the attempt on Dr. Stark’s life last September, the *murder* of Captain Nora Johnson and four dozen other National Guardsmen, and even the destruction and mass inmate release of the prison known as the Raft.”

He keeps his voice level, arms at his sides, even as he wants to *scream*. This one man had done so much damage, and Alexander Landry was planning on trying to cover it up.

“And what have you done, this year?” He asks, prepping the final nail in the coffin. “Ah, right. Forgive me. You only hired this man.”

The way the room reacted, you would’ve thought a bomb had gone off. Clambering voices, shouting, talking to one another and yelling questions both at him and Landry.

“How *dare*—” Landry starts, face turning purple. Percy talks over him, loud and unashamed. “And, Mr. President, I cannot help but see some truth in Councilwoman Hanover’s words. I have had a very trying few days, as you would know if you had *read the report I sent you*, so you will have to excuse the bluntness of my words. I was not made aware of the content of this meeting, or the fact that it would be publicized. I was not told who else would be attending, or even that fact that I was supposed to be receiving some unspecified award for my apparent service. It seems awfully like an attempt to strong-arm my silence out of me, sir. And I can’t help but wonder *why*. ”

“These are baseless accusations.” Landry snaps.

Percy hums. “As of ten minutes ago, I would have agreed with you. But this is extraordinarily unprofessional, and I find myself looking for an explanation.” He casually picks at his nails.

“Though, as for my words having no basis, I suppose we’ll find that out soon enough. My team has been consistently going through the disgraced ex-Secretary of State’s computer, and there seem to be copious communications between the two of you. More than any other staff member, actually.”

He could practically taste the outrage on his tongue. “You have no right,” Landry snarled.

“On the contrary, I absolutely do. When you ratified the Accords, you agreed that, upon proof of Hydra involvement—which I undeniably have—, any and all associates of the suspect can be searched. This includes even you, Mr. President. Accountability, just as you said.” He cleared his throat. “I believe your exact words were that *no man should have right above one another*. Though, one could argue that was far from what you were talking about, considering it came up in the conversation about your support of inhibitor collars on Enhanced children in schools so they had no ‘advantage’ over their peers, but I believe it suits this situation as well.” He said, not missing a beat.

“So, yes, what my team did, and will continue to do, is fully and completely legal by your own hand. Do I believe you have Hydra connections? Perhaps not. But per your orders, and, more importantly, those of the WSC, I am obligated to conduct a thorough search of every possible connection to Thaddeus Ross. Any other questions for me, sir?”

His own voice rang out, echoing off the walls, boosted by the complete and utterly muzzled silence that had befallen the onlookers.

Landry did nothing but stare, mustache quaking in rage.

“I’m told you’re a... relatively intelligent man,” He said, letting the slight doubt color his voice, tactfully not mentioning how utterly and completely incompetent the man must seem to him now. “So I’m sure you can see that this whole thing is rather suspect. Why, if I was just a bit more skeptical, I might say that this sudden award, *directly* after I assist in uncovering a truly nasty secret about your staff member—and apparent close associate—, while millions watch...” He gives the man an innocent look. “Well, I might say it sounds an awful lot like a bribe.” Percy smiles. “Good thing I’m not that skeptical, yet, isn’t it?”

“A *bribe*?” Landry hisses out. “This is an *honor*, Commander.”

“Perhaps.” He says dismissively. “Are we going to discuss the reparations I outlined in my last communication?”

He can tell the man has been pushed far over the edge before he even opens his mouth. “That is not the purpose of this conference, Commander. If you believe you can march in here and seize control of this meeting for your own purposes, to further whatever agenda you clearly have, you are *sorely* mistaken.” He says dangerously.

Percy raises a sole brow, wishing desperately he could communicate to the man that he’d once stood tall against the God King, had stood in front of his thirty-foot platinum throne and had threatened him and lived to tell the tale. He wants to tell Landry that he is so utterly *insignificant*, that he is nothing compared to the Giant King barreling down on Percy with a telephone-pole sized spear.

Instead, he just snorts. “My agenda? Mr. President, I came here with the intention to assist in the *massive* atonement the government desperately needs. I came here to discuss compensation for the families and victims. I came here to try and help people that this country hurt. I am appalled that I have to remind you that should be *your* agenda, sir.”

A thousand camera shutters go off.

“I left SHIELD years ago because I could not be complicit in the directed cruelty of millions, of billions. I left because I could not look the other way. And to make myself clear, I will not be doing that this time, either. Nor will I leave. I refuse to be complicit in whatever this is, Mr. President. I don’t want your *award*.” He says, voice dripping with disgust. “My agenda, as you put it, is to ask you one, simple question. Do you plan on doing anything to change the climate of Enhanced prejudice this country has so carefully, lovingly cultivated? The hatred that spawns right under your own nose, the intolerance and the prejudice. Do you plan on doing anything about it, or do you plan on being absolutely *useless*?”

Landry’s mouth is hanging open. Percy imagines nobody has ever spoken to him like that in his life—he’s quite glad to be the first.

Percy sniffs disdainfully and adjusts his tie. “Somehow, I find myself unsurprised. If you refuse to budge, sir, you *will* be left behind. In the name of progress, the world will move past you. Beyond you. I can promise you only that.” He states. “And unfortunately for you, Mr. President, I cannot put my sense of duty above my sense of self. Once again, in your own words, *Hydra should be exposed and gutted from the inside out*. If you meant what you said, if those were truly not just empty words, then you should certainly be supporting this. Hydra will live on as long as *you* assist in suppressing those they walk on. You wished to have Hydra dismantled, burned into ashes so fine that the only thing that remains is a memory. I aim to do that. But I cannot if you let your own hatred get in the way of the common good.” Percy lets out a breath, straightens his spine. “This is only difficult for men with something to hide, sir.”

It's a challenge, and a brazen one at that. Percy waits patiently, knowing that behind him, the Council listens with rapt attention. If he wasn't mistaken, Hanover was looking at him with something that felt an awful lot like *pride*.

When Landry replies, Percy is tense before the first word even falls off his tongue. He is angry, truly so, and a furious man in power is never a good thing. "You?" He scoffs, *mocking*. "I do not wish to demean our spectators by pointing out the obvious, but you will not be doing much of anything any time soon, Commander. I believe that your last brush with Hydra made sure of that." His words are demeaning and cruel, and Percy has to shove down the instinctual storm that roars to life inside him.

Around them, outrage rules. Hanover stands up, fury spitting out of her mouth. Even some of the reporters, passive spectators, gasp at the blatantly cruel words.

"Would you elaborate on that?" He says, quiet and low, halting anything that was going to be said.

Landry raises a brow. "I read your medical report, Mr. Jackson." He says, so utterly patronizing it makes Percy's skin crawl.

He calmly slips the sunglasses off his face, folds them and places them in his jacket pocket. Percy lets Landry, and Landry only, see the scars, *old scars*, across his face. His lips pull back in something that is grotesquely reminiscent of a smile.

"It seems I need to remind you once more. *It is Commander*. I have passed all my qualifying tests to be let back into the field. The world is more than just *sight*, Alexander. There's the difference between the two of us, I suppose. You were raised in a wealthy family, paid your way through Ivy Leagues, and even with the entire country at your disposal and all of your senses intact, you manage to be the most ignorant motherfucker I've ever had the displeasure of meeting. It's a good thing you, like Thaddeus Ross, are simply too stupid to sniff out the Enhanced man right under your nose."

Landry explodes into action, leaping up and slamming a fist down onto his podium. "If you think I will be tolerating one of the most integral task forces this country has being lead by a *ro*—" He pauses, and Percy can hear the way his teeth grind together. "An Enhanced—" He's spitting now, pure venom leaking from every syllable.

"No, no." Percy says calmly. "What were you about to say? Keep going." His heart is thudding in

his ears. “*Roach*? Is that what you were about to say? That’s quite funny, because that’s what our recently departed Secretary called me as well.”

And look where that got him.

He doesn’t say it, but based on Landry’s blood pressure going through the roof, he can tell his message was received. Landry stares down at the man who didn’t have the Secretary of State killed, but *killed him*.

“And you are clearly beyond help in terms of intelligence, because me and my team do not, and never will, answer to you. We are run by the WSC. Not a fucking fascist who clearly thinks he’s most important than he really is.”

He pauses, and can’t help but add something on. “And, besides, what were you planning on doing? Firing me? Even if you had the authority, I guarantee whoever you scrounge up to replace me will not be as *near* as efficient.” He gives the man his most pleasant smile, and can feel the way Landry’s hair stands on end. “If you hire them personally, you can probably fill in that open Hydra spot as well. Perhaps leave the vetting and hiring to the WSC.”

He brushes imaginary dust off his shoulder. “Even as someone as simple minded as you can probably gather the fact that I’m declining this *generous* award. Thank you for your time, Council.”

He turns on his heel, and as he strides out of the room, the clicking of camera shutters follows him. Percy raises his chin, lets them get clear shots of his face. He had been hiding long enough. Their photos and videos will get nowhere—but he wants them to *see*. To see him, all he is, proud chin and unapologetic face.

Percy owed it to them all, all those kids who died in Ontario and in Dredov’s ships, whose names would never all be known. They died for being who they were. The least he could do was step out of the shadows he’d wrapped himself in. It felt wrong hiding who he was, when not everyone had the luxury.

Percy would not hide. Especially not for the comfort of men like Alexander Landry.

They're both waiting for him.

Tony is sitting on the couch, leaning forward with his arms on his knees. "You were right. He strong-armed all the reporters into signing NDA's, deleted all the footage."

He was right, then. All those photos and videos the anchors had taken of his face were gone. He didn't really care about those, though—they saw him. That's all that mattered.

Bucky makes a disgusted noise. "Doesn't even have the decency to let the public know what happened." He says, face scrunched up.

Percy's mouth curled into a smile. He loosens his tie, undoes the top button to his shirt, and toes off his shoes. Bucky smiles up at him, and Percy drops down onto the couch next to him, leaning against his side.

Bucky's arm wraps around his middle, and he curls up into him.

"Turn the TV on, would you?" Percy asks.

Tony briefly raises his eyebrows, but complies without protest.

And, sure enough, there it is.

The recording of the entire thing, from start to finish, plays back to them on the television. Tony chokes on his coffee, and Bucky lunges for the remote, eyes wide. He flips to the other channel, only to find the same thing on it as well. Again, and again, and again, every single channel Tony has—which is a *lot*.

Every single channel shows President Landry's true colors, shows the Council's outrage, Willa Hanover's barely contained fury. It's all from the same angle; directly behind him, showing his back and nothing more.

The part where Landry mentions Percy's blindness is smoothly edited out, as if it was never there in the first place. And, unlike the footage deleted off a dozen or so cameras, this one cuts off as soon as it became clear he was walking out of the chamber, just before his face could be seen.

"You released the footage." Tony breathed, astonished.

Percy leaned back into the cushion. "He was betting on the fact that I wouldn't go to the press. A man like that thinks everyone is just as ashamed and secretive as he is." His lips pulled up into a smile that cannot be described in any other way than *satisfied*. "He was wrong."

Bucky lets out an incredulous laugh, and it's one of the sweetest sounds Percy has ever heard. "How?" He asks, delighted. "Percy, how on *Earth*?"

"One of the anchors," He said. "They were keeping an eye on the people manning the cameras. They never considered one of the anchors would, for some reason, have a tiny little camera pinned to her lapel."

Tony is staring at him, eyes wide and mouth hanging open. "And...you edited it?"

He shrugs modestly. "That's the thing about deleting the evidence." Percy says. "If someone brings something to light...well, it's not like you can dispute it."

Bucky, on the other hand, is staring at him like he just hung the moon and the stars. "You," He whispers. "Are *evil*." The way he says it, it cannot be anything other than a compliment. Percy smiles, pleased, with flushed cheeks.

"You've done a lot of absolutely insane shit, Percy, but this...this might just take the cake." Tony comments, shaking his head in bewilderment. "He'll know you had something to do with it."

Percy scoffed. "He can come at me with all he's got. The WSC backs me more than ever." He raises an eyebrow. "Besides, what is he going to do? Out me as an Enhanced? Maybe twenty minutes ago that would have been his leverage, but," He waves his hand loosely in the direction of the television.

"You aired out one of your deepest secrets on television just to deprive him of a bargaining chip." Bucky realizes, sounding utterly delighted. "Amazing."

“Absolutely fucking nuts, is what it is.” Tony corrects. “I’m proud.”

Percy shrugs elegantly. “Men like him see everyone as pawns in their game of power. They never really consider the alternative.”

“Alternative?”

A crooked grin. “He never considered that I just might be the other player.”

Chapter End Notes

me, updating the relationship tag: the hoes gon LOVE this

percy calling the president a fucking fascist on national television >>>>>

but yeah so to be clear: the news people recorded the entire thing, including his face when he left. all of that got deleted by landry's people. but one anchor (lacy from the aphrodite cabin, in case you were wondering) had planned this with percy and had a little camera on her lapel. she was standing right behind percy, and so his face isn't in it. and when he turned to leave, her footage cut off so his face isn't in it. same with his blindness---they decided it was too identifying and edited out any mention of it. and since thats the only stuff that hadn't been deleted, thats the only source of what happened in there

but yeah enjoy smart plotting percy and also some cathartic screaming at a US president from 2017 who's totally not based of anyone hahaha

percy: *does something absolutely fucking devious*

bucky: hfabdvjuqrebfgjqrhefhgrwhgfuvh <3 <3 <3 <3 <3

epilogue part two, then i start working on the sequel!

plumbing baby. goodbye.

Epilogue Part 2: Winding Down

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Bucky's last BARF session was both incredibly tense and a joyous moment.

Percy sat down, right next to him, and linked their hands together as Tony attached the pads to his temples. As his fist tightened around Percy's knuckles, crushing his hand, he didn't say a word. He just leaned against the back of the chair, listening and feeling Bucky's heartbeat like it was the only thing that mattered.

In a way, it was.

He got into the chair. Just like it had actually happened, they dragged him, tied him down, shoved rubber in between his teeth.

*Just like it actually happened, he **screamed**.*

*And just like it actually happened, they repeated the trigger words. The sequence echoed in his ears, his skull, blurring thoughts and memories and **him**.*

He stood up. He followed them, obedient as ever. He got a new arm, a red star painted on the shoulder.

He followed them out to the courtyard. His new handler was there.

His new handler was a traitor.

He killed his new handler.

Bucky watched as he beat Percy unconscious, as he slid that blade not into his ribs, but ear-to-ear, sending a crimson waterfall down his neck and chest.

The Soldier stood up, wiped off his blade, and left Percy's body to cool in the snow.

He walked back inside.

"Ready to comply."

It was so incredibly fast, because that was all that was needed. Just a few, agonizing minutes. That was all that had reflected back to him. Just a few minutes of the worst time of his life.

He'd expected it to be longer.

But, he supposed, it made sense. He wasn't scared of the long hours and the days and the years. He was scared of that. He was scared of what had only taken *second*, sliding the blade in between Percy's ribs.

Bucky didn't need to relive the chair and the numbness and the static that roared in his ears, because he he just had, not a few days ago.

It had only taken a few minutes for him to do irreparable damage.

He jolted out of it. Tony was standing in front of him, tablet in one hand and the other unsticking the pads from his temples for the last time. He was looking at him, something incredibly gentle and understanding in his eyes. Sympathy.

It was only then Bucky realized he was crying. Silent, numb tears slid down his face, wetting his lashes and cheeks. His shoulders shook, but not a sound escaped him.

Tony looked him up and down, then wordlessly turned away, moving to the other side of the lab. Bucky turned to Percy, Percy who was sitting there, holding his hand. Percy, who had a healing stab wound in his side, stitched putting at his skin, but who was warm and moving and had angled his body towards him.

Percy's hand came up and gently wiped the tears off his face. "Hey," He said tenderly. "Why are you crying? It's over, James."

"I'm sorry," Was all Bucky could get out.

That brought the little furrow that lived in between Percy's brows to the surface. "I don't need your apologies." He said firmly. "There's nothing to warrant them."

Bucky leaned his face into Percy's palm. "Still." He whispered. "I'm still sorry."

He looked down at their intertwined hands, Bucky's pale skin versus Percy's warmed bronze. Percy's long, nimble fingers, short, blunt nails. Music hands, his mother would call them. Calluses and scars, but gentle.

It was then he realized his own grip was immovably *tight*, his knuckles white around Percy's. He yanked his hand away as if he was burned. He knew his own strength—it would be a miracle if Percy's hand wasn't *broken*.

"Sorry," Bucky said immediately, eyes wide. "I—I didn't mean to hold on that tight."

Tony looked up, attention pulled, and he cautiously eyed them from the worktable.

Percy seemed a bit confused, before realization dawned. "Oh? It's fine, James. I barely noticed." He reassured. For good measure, he lifted his hand and flexed his fingers. "See?"

"I've literally seen this guy crush steel with his bare hands." Tony said in a strangled voice. "What the shit, Percy?"

Percy opened his mouth, then closed it. Like he was considering something. Then,

"It's part of my abilities. Pressure doesn't affect me much. Like, this one time, the Earth Mother snatched me out of the water like a little ragdoll and squeezed. Snapped all my ribs, sure, but if it was anybody else they would have died. Eyeballs popping out of their head and everything." He offers.

Tony puts his head in his hands.

Right before Bucky tells him the trigger words, he puts both hands—flesh, and the new vibranium one Shuri had made—on each side of Percy’s face, gently cupping his cheeks. Bucky stares at him for a long, weighty moment.

By the way he moves his head, ever so slight, Percy guesses he’s looking directly into his own sightless eyes.

He doesn’t ask why.

Percy just echoes the words back, voice incredibly soft. The sequence is a breath of ice cold air intruding on the warm August day, and Bucky squeezes his eyes shut. He waits for snow to fall, for the warm room to cloud over in frost.

It never does.

Instead, the demigod’s hold on him is tender, like Bucky is something that is worth being gentle to.

“It’s done. It’s over.” He whispers.

Bucky shudders. “It’s over.” He repeats, like he doesn’t quite yet believe it.

Percy presses a kiss to the top of his head. He will soon, he swears. James Barnes will believe in his freedom if it’s the last thing Percy ever does. The words are a weight in his chest, wrapped in grief and pain and reverence from the trust Bucky had placed in him. Somehow, it’s both agonizing and freeing at the same time, rigid and serrated, soft and forgiving.

He pulls Bucky closer.

He finally sits down to write Natasha. It's been weeks, silence on both their parts. Bucky curls up next to him on the couch, settling his chin atop Percy's shoulder.

It's longer than any of the other letters by far, filled with short anecdotes from both of them.

Tony takes the paper when they're done, and scratches out something quick on the bottom. He folds it up neatly, seals it up in an envelope. Neither of them ask what he wrote.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Percy takes a sip of his slushie. "What?"

"Your *birthday*, numbskull. After we all missed it last year, and you didn't even say anything?" Tony demands. "I had to look at your file from forever ago to find it—" He halts. "I'm sorry, are you drinking a *slushie*?"

"I took James to his first 7-11." Percy informs him.

Tony blinks a couple times. "I—alright, whatever. Why didn't you tell us?"

"Tell us what?" Bucky asks as he walks into the room, Mrs. O'Leary trailing not far behind.

Before Percy can say anything, Tony exclaims, "His birthday! It was a few days ago and he didn't tell us!"

Bucky slowly rounds onto Percy, who huffs. "I don't celebrate my birthday." He says shortly. Bucky and Tony exchange a look, approach softening upon hearing his tone. "Why?" Tony asks.

Percy sighs, taking another long draw from his slurpee. It's probably stained his mouth bright blue, and makes his teeth feel a little fuzzy. He takes a deep breath, preparing himself. "It's sort of a long story." Percy starts with, grasping at where to begin. "The whole thing started a bit after the second World War." The words are faint, thin and delicate. "An Oracle issued a prophecy. A truly terrible

one. It foretold that a demigod of the eldest three Gods would either save or destroy Olympus.”

“Oracle? Like Delphi?” Tony pipes up.

“Exactly like Delphi, actually. Her mummified corpse used to live in my summer camp.” Percy replies. Bucky nods along easily to that part. “Anyways, it, uh, it said that whatever happened, it was going to all fall into place the day a child of the Big Three—Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades—turned sixteen. The brothers made a pact to not father anymore demigod children.”

Tony inhales sharply, blood draining from his face, and Percy recalls the conversation they’d had, what felt like a lifetime ago, where he’d told him of the prophecy’s existence, of how he saw the ghost of Achilles on the banks of the Styx.

“Hades had two children before the pact was made. Zeus found out, and killed their mother out of anger. In the end, Hades hid his children in a place where time would not pass. Then, decades later, Zeus had a child of his own, breaking the oath he took. Her name was Thalia.” He says. “She... ended up running away from her mother. Met two other demigods along the way. She sacrificed herself to save them from a horde of monsters sent by Hades. Her father turned her into a pine tree, so she could live on, in a way.”

Tony slumps down, drifting over to a seat. “How old was she?”

“Twelve. It’s always twelve.” Percy echoes Grover’s words from years ago.

“Jesus,” Bucky mutters.

“Then, a few years after that, Poseidon broke the oath as well. I was born. When I was thirteen, Thalia ended up turning back into a person. A week before her sixteenth birthday, the Olympian Council voted on whether or not to kill her. The only way for her to save herself was to join Artemis’s ranks, swearing eternal servitude and gaining immortality in exchange. When I was fourteen, the di Angelos, Nico and Bianca, left the place they’d been staying, eighty years later. Bianca, too, was older than me.” Percy’s voice gets progressively quieter, distant and wispy. “She died a few months later.”

He shakes his head. “After that,” Percy continues, “It was apparent that I was the prophecy child. Nobody actually told me what it *was* until a few months beforehand. There was a son of Hermes—Luke. He’d betrayed the Gods, had revived the Titan Lord Kronos. He recruited monsters, minor

Gods, and even some demigods. The day before I turned sixteen, he launched a siege on Olympus. We rallied to defend it.”

Mrs. O’Leary presses her body against his legs, a reassuring weight. He runs an absent hand down her spine. “It was bloody. Forty teenagers versus an army of immortal monsters and Titans. The city was a warzone.”

“The city?” Bucky echoes.

“Manhattan. One of the Gods had cast a spell—a powerful one. Every mortal in the city fell into an endless sleep. We tried to get everyone to safety, but—” He breaks off, chewing on his lip. “It lasted almost two days.”

Tony leans back, soaking this all in with a pale complexion. “You were fifteen?” He whispers.

Percy nods. “Luke had become the host of Kronos. His own consciousness was taken over. The morning of my sixteenth birthday, he wrestled control back long enough, and I handed Luke a cursed blade and watched him kill himself. He realized Kronos had lied to him—he wasn’t just going to kill the Gods, but everyone. He wanted to do the right thing, in the end.” He concluded, brow drawn.

Bucky has never looked at him with a sadder expression. “That’s why you don’t celebrate it?” He asks faintly. “Because of that?”

Percy can’t help the snort that rises up out of him. “More like that was what kickstarted the pattern, really. A few weeks after my seventeenth, I was abducted by a Goddess and my memory was wiped. My eighteenth,” He swallowed. “I wasn’t around for it.”

“Where were you?” Tony asks.

He thinks of acidic atmospheres, sulfuric air and bloody clouds. “Nowhere good.” Percy answers. Then, he shakes his head. “It doesn’t matter. But, yeah, my nineteenth wasn’t terrible, I suppose. But my twentieth was just after I joined SHIELD, and we all know how *that* turned out. The actual day, I was sitting in some Moldovian prison with a bullet in my leg. My twenty first, I was in Tajikistan committing mass murder. Twenty two, Rumlow tried to blow me up. Twenty three, and I had just become a mercenary to pay for my sister’s medical bills. I thought twenty-four was going to be alright, but then I got shot three times on live television.” He waves a hand. “And a whole

bunch of shit happened this year, I'm not even sure which part ruined number twenty-five."

He pauses. "What? Why are you guys looking at me like that? I can feel it, you know."

Tony and Bucky sound absolutely horrified and very, very sad. "That's...terrible." Tony says quietly. "Something always ruins it?" Bucky summarizes.

Percy shrugs. "Pretty much. I mean, there's also the fact that my birthday is the anniversary death date of a dozen teenagers that died in the streets fighting their parents' war." He says. "I just don't like it. Doesn't seem like something to celebrate."

Annabeth smiles at him. Knowing. She always knows.

"He's a good one, isn't he?" She asks.

Percy lays back in the meadow. He thinks of Bucky's smile, his touch, the way he laughed and how he hugged, the way he softened whenever he was with Percy.

"He is." He whispers. "He really is."

Annabeth leans over to him. "Happy birthday. Twenty-five." She says, shaking her head. "It doesn't feel real."

He snorts. "For me more than you, Annie. I never imagined I'd make it to sixteen. Now look at me. I can vote. You know, I can run for office in Brazil."

She stares at him. "Don't. Please."

He grins.

Annabeth's face sobers, but still a smile pulls at her lips. "I'm proud of you, Percy"

The next morning, there's a sole blue cupcake waiting on his side table when he wakes up.

He sits on his bed, remembering a terribly frosted cake gifted to him in the dining pavilion, Annabeth's giggling laugh ringing in his ears like an echo.

Percy smiles faintly.

It's a really good cupcake.

Maybe twenty-five wasn't *terrible*.

"So," Tony says, leaning against the counter. "The whole Gods thing. How you dealing with that?"

Bucky looks up from his book. "What?"

Tony waves a loose hand. "Pretty perspective-altering stuff, isn't it? Just checking if you're having an existential crisis or not."

That makes him snort blithely. "After everything that's happened to me, it'd be pretty depressing if some assholes in the sky finally made me break."

Tony's smile fades slightly. "Yeah," Is all he says. "Gods don't seem that benevolent, do they?"

Bucky's face tightens. "He was twelve, Tony." Is all he says. "Twelve."

The look in Tony's eyes says that he knows that all too well.

The brief, tense moment passes when he adds, "It makes sense, though, doesn't it? I mean, you've seen Percy. His face is so *symmetrical*. Like, idealized version of a human type symmetrical. Have you noticed that?"

Tony stares at him for a long minute. "...No."

They don't celebrate his birthday, but, a week later, they do have a little get together to commemorate Bucky's last session.

The Parkers come over, as do Ned and MJ. Pepper and Rhodey show up, and everyone crowds together into the common room to play board games and watch movies.

Tony destroys them at Monopoly, laughing as he does so. By the end of the game, Peter throws a plastic hotel at him and starts going on about the socialist revolution. Bucky is the reigning king of Scrabble. Pepper is legendary at Uno, Rhodey defeats them soundly at Candy Land, and Peter, MJ, and Ned team up to beat everyone else at Trivial Pursuit. Percy wins Clue easily and startlingly fast. Bucky flicks the little rope token at him and proclaims he's cheating.

By the time the night is over, there's far too much popcorn stuck in between the couch cushions, random game pieces littered across the room, and Tony has a little red mark the shape of a Monopoly hotel on his forehead.

Ned falls asleep curled up in a beanbag, Rhodey leaning back in a recliner, Peter on the carpet in a pile of blankets with Mrs. O'Leary, MJ in an armchair, and Pepper and Tony on couches.

Percy and Bucky are awake the longest, staying silent in order to let the others get their rest. They're laying together under a quilt, Percy tucked up to Bucky's chest. Arms, both metal and bone, are wrapped around him, holding him close. He falls asleep like that, cheek pressed against Bucky's sweatshirt, and doesn't get yanked awake by a nightmare even once.

Tony was dreading this day. Ever since Peter told him about what happened at the high school, Toomes and the Rhino, and his subsequent identity reveal.

Peter came up to him, eyes wide and pleading, asking if his friends could come over. Not just Ned and MJ, but his whole little nerd squad.

It's a dirty trick. Peter is sixteen years old. Those puppy dog eyes should *not* be as compelling as they are.

He gives in. Pepper snickers at him from across the table.

Tony knows their names, just from how much Peter talks about them. Cindy, Abe, Charles, Betty, and Sally. They all stand in his tower, eyes wide and darting around. Peter bounces on his heels, Ned and MJ behind him.

They invade the common area like a swarm of bugs.

Peter seems happy, though, so he allows it.

They chat for hours, talking about school and science and, of course, Spider-Man. Peter does a couple flips and hangs on the ceiling for them, and proudly picks up Ned and MJ, each in one arm, when they ask him to show off his abilities.

The entire team is absolutely enamored with FRIDAY, Cindy Moon fanning her face as she speaks to the AI. "You are amazing." She tells the ceiling seriously. "I would defend your coding to the death." It's a solemn oath.

Everyone else takes it. Tony is fairly sure they made a blood pact.

Peter talks about life in the tower, about the facilities and its inhabitants. Waxed rhapsodic about Pepper, gushes about Rhodey. When he tells them about Tony, it's completely different, not just awe in his voice but something stronger that most definitely does *not* make the engineer's heart clench.

When he gets to Mrs. O'Leary, next, everyone's interest is even more piqued. Peter leads them on a magnificent, holy, eight person quest to find her. They eventually end up in the kitchen after hearing a blender, drawn to the noise like they're moths and someone just turned on a lamp.

Teenagers are so goddamn *weird*.

It gets worse. It gets so much worse.

Because at the same time the little doom squad is lured into the kitchen by a single sound, Percy is standing at the island, Bucky on a barstool.

"You," Tony hisses from his spot at the table, "Have the worst timing."

Percy and Bucky tilt their heads in unison, like two dogs hearing a squeaky toy.

Tony rubs a hand over his eyes. His life is Hell.

The entire team freezes when they see Percy. Like, full stop, speech halted, Tony would not be surprised if they stopped *breathing*. They just stare.

Percy, who's wearing basketball shorts and a faded tee, a massive case of bedhead even though it was the middle of the afternoon, one hand atop the blender lid. "Yo." He says, before turning back to whatever the fuck he was doing.

Charles faints. MJ catches him and drags him away into the pantry. "The proximity to the grain will revive him." She says as she drops him by the large bag of rice on the floor.

They all watch, absolutely enamored, not even noticing one of their own ranks falling. The worst part is, Percy doesn't even seem to care. He and Bucky chat idly in what sounds like French as Percy does...whatever he's doing. Seriously, what *is* that?

What he first assumed to be a smoothie has been poured into a large stockpot, and is now being heated on medium-high. Bucky watches with a vested interest, seemingly offering suggestions every now and then.

They're *accomplices*.

"Hi," Sally Avril squeaks, the apparent bravest of the group. "What are you doing?"

Percy halts in the middle of his sentence. Smoothly switching bag to English, he answers, "Making some Drink."

"A drink?" This time, it's Abe that speaks. He looks a little dazed. His eyes are fixated on Percy's biceps. Tony considers stabbing a fork through his ear and into his brain.

"No, no, Drink. There's only one at any given time, and it's right here." He says. "Something my cousins and I came up with while on a boat together in our teens. There's this one food we all had at some point, but the thing was, it tasted different to everyone for some reason. So we tried to make a substance that somehow tasted like all of our separate things at once. Drink."

"Oh," Abe said faintly. They watched as he poured what looked like an entire packet of Fun Dip, the little sugar stick included, into the pot. It bubbled and hissed like acid upon contact.

Cindy inches forward, leaning over the stove to look into the pot. She squints. Stares for a very, very long time. Then, "Can I try this?"

Percy, a towel on his shoulder, leans back against the counter to evaluate her. "Do you have a will? It almost killed Jason. Piper ended up tossing him in a full bathtub with a toaster to wake him from the instant dissociative shock he went into."

This seems to seal the deal for Cindy, who nods vigorously. "It's written in crayon in a locked Pretty Princess journal I got from the Scholastic Book Fair in the second grade. My parents will know what to do."

"Good enough."

And with that, everyone is clambering around the pot, but make way for Bucky as he approaches with a stack of metal cups that Tony didn't even think he owned. "It strips the paint off of the fun plastic cups." He says regretfully as he passes them out. "We already lost the Lightning McQueen

one from Walmart.” Percy nods mournfully.

The children only now seem to realize they’re in the presence of a war hero, and clutch the cups like they’re a lifeline. Tony watches as they ladle it out.

It’s of no distinguishable color nor consistency. There may be chunks in it. It definitely is emitting a low-level glow. From where he’s sitting, the smell of *something* hits him and he almost doubles over.

Sally stares down in her cup. “What’s in here?” She doesn’t, to Tony’s despair, sound the least bit wary. Entranced, more like.

Before Percy can respond, Bucky tips his head back and takes the entire thing like a shot. He puts the emptied cup down onto the counter, smacking his lips. “I was forced to drink a gallon of gasoline, once. It’s like that but with cinnamon.” He says, matter of factly.

Percy hums. “Interesting. Neither of those ingredients are in there.”

A considerate look overtakes Bucky’s face. “Huh. Weird.”

“You drank gas? I see what Mr. Harrington was talking about when he said positive role models.” Abe says. “I want to be exactly like you when I grow up.” Then, he tosses it back with a long, noisey slurp.

Not to be outdone, Betty squints at her cup. “I’m not above drinking car fluids.” She sips it unflinchingly.

Cindy pulls one of those twisty, loopy straws from her purse, sticks it in, and takes a long draw from it.

Ned drinks from his, as does MJ. She walks to the pantry, and dribbles some into Charles’s mouth with a small spoon. Peter, who refused a cup on principle of not enjoying the shape of it, scoops some up in the ladle and sticks his tongue in it, holding it there for at least an entire minute.

It's purely silent.

Then, Charles convulses on the hardwood, and for a moment Tony thinks he's going to have to pay many, many medical bills. But then the kid shoots up, walking towards the pot like he's possessed, and dunks Peter's abandoned cup into it, filling it and taking a long drink.

"Tastes like essential oils." Cindy says. Abe whips around to face her. "Excuse me? No. It tastes like that one time we ate dried watercolor paint bricks."

Betty frowns. "Uh, what? No, feel how it burns when it goes down? That's old Lunchables pepperoni, right there." She declares. Personally, Tony would assume it's the chemical burns forming in her esophagus.

"You're all insane. Tastes like subway floor." Ned proclaims next as he takes another sip. "Rat poison? This smells like rat poison."

"I think the tingly part is ketchup, actually." Peter says around his stuck-out tongue. "The chunks are dried Elmer's glue, maybe?"

Charles refills his empty cup. "I was thinking laced grape Fanta like that one senior gave us." Sally looks over at him. "That didn't have chunks in it." She disputes. Her eyes go a little unfocused. "Did it?" She shrugs and drains her cup.

Bucky is nodding along to all their reviews. "It's sweet, but also so spicy." He refills his glass. "I didn't know people these days had anything this flavorful." Percy pats him on the back. "He's still upset about the new bananas." The demigod explains to the group.

"They taste like nothing." Bucky hisses as he drinks. Percy gives him another pat.

Cindy's eyes are locked onto Percy. "You," She says, "Are even cooler than I thought."

Percy gives her a lazy thumbs up.

Abe doubles over and coughs until something comes out of his throat and splatters into his cup.

Bucky leans forward and peers into it. “Oh, you found it. I was wondering where my plum went.”

As soon as Abe finished wheezing, he grinned. “Sick.”

Cindy swirled hers around like it was fine wine. “Can I get this to-go?”

Percy sighs. “As soon as we find a material that can withstand it for more than an hour, I’ll let you know.”

Bucky goes back for his third serving. “I like it.” Bucky decides. “Burns like kerosene. Grainy enough to keep you on your toes.” He compliments.

Percy’s eyes positively *shone*.

Tony packs up his stuff and leaves.

A scarred man in red sits down across from Bucky.

His eyes are intense, boring straight into his skull. “You know I can’t die, correct?”

Bucky nods. He’s heard many things about the man known as Deadpool over the years—he was a threat that even Hydra had deemed too dangerous to go after.

Wade Wilson leans in even further. “And you are aware that I care a whole lot about Percy?”

Ah. There it is.

Bucky leans in to match his posture. His voice is low, even, and undoubtedly serious. “If it was possible for me to find those of his Gods that have hurt him, I would slaughter them.”

Thunder booms on a clear day. Bucky doesn't flinch.

Wade leans back, an approving look on his face.

The ballroom was utterly massive, a chandelier worth more money than he had ever *seen* hanging in the center of the frescoed ceiling. Hundreds of people milled about, dancing and drinking and chatting.

Music was being played from the far end of the ballroom, a quite talented string quartet that was far more interesting than any of the other people present.

Well, *almost* all the people, he corrected as a familiar head of dark hair approached his spot against the wall.

"For your first public appearance since being free of the programming, you're trying very hard to not make it public." Percy noted as he came to stand beside him.

Bucky scrunched his nose. "Can you blame me? If one more person asks me *what it was like* I'm going to give a gentle reminder that I *am* still an assassin."

Percy snorted into his drink. Bucky unabashedly looked him up and down for what seemed like the hundredth time. His black pants and waistcoat were perfectly tailored, made of fine, soft material. His tie was knotted neatly, and his hair had been slightly slicked back, save for a few strands hanging in his face.

Despite his easy demeanor, Bucky knew he was rather tense. Could see it in the slight rolling of his shoulders, the way he cocked his head to the side, a movement so small anybody else would have missed it, showing that he was paying a great deal of attention to the areas around them.

They'd both gotten their fair share of looks when they walked in. Bucky's metal hand stuck out from his sleeve, and Percy's white cane stood out starkly. To everyone, Percy was a stranger. This man had no viable connection to the mysterious Commander Jackson that was on the news—he was just a WSC rep. Tony, in his experience, hadn't missed a beat at all the whispers, smiling and

greeting everyone they passed as he disappeared into the crowd.

Normally, Percy would stay far, far away from any of these events—as would Bucky, for that matter. But Hanover's wife had gotten into an accident, and was in the hospital with a broken leg. And, apparently, Percy was her first option for a stand-in.

Another perfect example of Percy Jackson's bleeding heart, Bucky supposed. He'd accompanied the two at Tony's insistence that it would be beneficial for the public to see him more often. He hadn't cared much about that, but since he'd heard about the event, the only thing he could think of was walking in on Romanoff and Barton watching that video, seeing Percy bleed out on the stage at the Stark Gala.

So, yes, he came, and kept a firm eye on Percy and Tony. That did not mean he was remotely happy about it, though.

Dignitaries and politicians from all over float around the room, shaking hands and having empty conversations with full agendas. He watches them all, cataloging faces and names and languages.

"What are you going to do about Graves?" He asks, quietly switching to Portuguese once he's certain nobody in the vicinity speaks it.

Percy takes a sip of his drink. Whatever it is, it's non-alcoholic, that much Bucky can tell. Percy didn't drink. He had an inkling to why, but some things just didn't need to be brought up. *"Covered his tracks too well,"* He murmurs. *"We couldn't find anything substantial. He'll slip up eventually."* Percy says lowly.

Bucky nods. *"What about the rest of the Council?"*

"Checked out. Either they're decent people, or too scared of Hanover to get into anything shady. I mean, they gave me a raise, so," He ends with a smile.

Bucky smiles fondly. *"Right. And now? You've already vulgarly berated the President, killed the Secretary of State, and stalked a Councilman."*

Another lazy sip. *"Today, socializing and that chocolate fountain I can smell from here. Tomorrow, I start blackmailing senators."* He says it so definitively that Bucky can't help but laugh. In a truly terrible imitation of Landry, he asks, *"But, what about your service? Your great duty to this country?"*

Percy scowls at him. *"I'll dunk you in the chocolate fountain."* He threatens.

"That's not very American of you." Bucky mocks. *"What would the poor bald eagles think?"*

"When Tony inevitably takes over the world I'm going to make sure he and his Illuminati buddies outlaw plum imports."

"Alright, first of all? Hurtful. And you think he's part of the Illuminati?"

Percy gave him a dubious look. *"You don't?"*

...Fair enough.

He looks over the crowd. The ensemble has picked up a little, playing a faster paced waltz. Around them, dresses twirled around feet as pairs moved in synchronized fashion, couples spinning and swaying.

Bucky turned back to Percy, a slight smile playing on his lips. "You waiting to dance with someone?"

Percy hums consideringly. "Oh, I'm just waiting for the right person to ask, actually."

"And," Bucky prompts, "Who would this person be?"

"Oh, you know," Percy says airily, "Tall, bald, preferably an eyepatch and trenchcoat—" Bucky smacks him on the arm. Percy laughs sweetly, breathlessly, and Bucky imagines it right up against his neck. "Sorry! I'm kidding!"

Bucky rolls his eyes and takes the hand Percy extends. "You ever danced before?" He asks.

Percy replies to that with a raised eyebrow. "This isn't the '40s, darling. Teenagers play video

games, not learn to swing dance.” He says. He folds up his cane, and easily slides it inside Bucky’s jacket, fingers skimming across his side. “I think you’re going to have to take the lead on this one.”

Bucky leans forward and slides a hand around his waist, pulling him in closer. “I’ll manage.” He says lowly, and gets to watch as the flush climbs up Percy’s cheeks as he tugs him towards the dance floor.

Natasha stared down at the paper in her hands.

It was much, much longer than the others she had received—justified, after a weeks long gap in correspondence. It had been slipped under her door by one of the Dora, whom she thanked profusely.

Clint was somewhere in the living room, Wanda in her room sulking *still*, and Steve and Sam in the kitchen. She sat alone on her bed, running a nail over the lip of the envelope over and over again. She took a breath, then opened it.

The first thing she noticed was that this one, unlike the others, had different sections. The first, like normal, was typed out.

Hey, Natasha.

You’ll have to excuse the lack of communication recently—things have been busy these last few weeks.

You probably saw the news. It’s true. The Secretary of State was in on it. He’s been taken care of. I made sure of it. We’ve looked into all of his associates, and can’t find anything on them. We don’t plan on dropping it anytime soon, though.

James is fine. The Winter Soldier resurfaced for a bit. It left us all a bit shaken, but he’s alright now. Broke out of the programming.

Another Hydra base down. We've recaptured a good amount of the Raft escapees, and are working on the rest. That place isn't being rebuilt. The Council decided it was for the best. I agree.

I'm assuming you saw the other news, as well. I hope you did, at least, because if it made it all the way to Wakanda I'll be truly pleased.

My best guess? Landry has his suspicions about Integrity. Or, at least, someone else did and passed it along to him. He just didn't care—anything would be better than it's original purpose, to him.

You want to know the best fucking part?

Project Integrity was originally supposed to be for Enhanced awareness and amnesty. It was instead used to fund the dehumanization and murder of up to a hundred of us. How terrible is that?

You'll notice my use of the word "us". That's also true. I'm Enhanced, and I've been blind since I was seventeen.

Don't be too hard on yourself for not noticing. Not everyone can be perfect.

I hope you're doing alright.

-PJ

That second to last line almost sounded *teasing*. She leaned back in her seat, staring at the wall in front of her. This one was far more lighthearted than the others, even after everything that had apparently gone on in his life the past few weeks. Something must have caused that change, but she couldn't quite guess what.

When the leaked footage of the meeting with Landry found its way to her, she'd quite honestly never been more shocked in her entire life. Clint had been sitting next to her when it came on, and they'd both choked on their drinks. Neither his face nor name were showed, but Natasha had long since been trained out of relying on things like that. His defiant posture, and tones of his voice as he spoke.

She'd known, instantly, that was Percy Jackson on screen.

Against his writings, she mentally hit herself. How could she not have known? It should have been so *obvious*.

Natasha shook her head and returned to the paper. This section was handwritten, and, after a second, she realized she recognized the penmanship.

Romanoff,

It's Barnes. I'm alright.

He's gone.

The Soldier is gone, for good this time.

I never thought it could ever be this good. I'm happy here. Truly.

I don't think I'm coming back. Definitely not to stay.

How is everyone? Steve?

-Barnes

And then, and this one brought a slight shine to her eyes, there was another.

Hey, Rushman.

If you get tired of hanging around the riffraff, we have a couple dozen Enhanced convicts running around the country. We already have a Spider, but we might be able to make use of a Widow.

Unless you think you're too rusty, of course.

-Stark.

There was a phone number at the bottom.

Natasha brought up a hand to cover her mouth and muffle the sob that followed.

Sally Jackson was many things.

An author, a baker, a 'sculptor', a wife.

First and foremost, she was a *mother*. Her babies always came first.

The first time she'd held Percy, swaddled up in a blanket and his eyes closed, a shock of inky hair atop his head, she knew that instant that there wasn't a single thing she wouldn't do for him.

And it was true.

Marrying Gabe Ugliano was one of the most terrible choices she'd been forced to make. He was a disgusting, awful man, and she'd wanted nothing more to divorce him the first time he'd so much as raised his voice at her. But the monsters stayed away.

The monsters stayed away from her son.

So she picked up extra shifts at the candy store, sent Percy to boarding schools so he wouldn't have to live with the man, so he wouldn't have to bare witness to how he treated her. And, even at school, the monsters stayed away. That was the miracle, the only reason she hadn't laced Gabe's food and sent his body floating down the Hudson.

She watched as Percy grew, as he got taller and broader and he looked more and more like his father every passing day.

The way he frowned, his brow taking a deep furrow. The way he laughed, loud and clear like a sunny day. The ebony strands of his hair, dark as the deep waters. The storm that lived in his eyes.

Percy's dimpled, crooked smile was all him, though.

Sally was there, holding him through nightmares and panic attacks, offering what little comfort she could against the world. The prophecy and the quests and the *deaths* that pushed down on her baby's shoulders, what she'd tried so hard to protect him from.

She gave him her blessing to bathe in the Styx, kissed him on the forehead as he picked up his sword to go fight a war.

Her son went missing, and when he came back, it was like a part of him had been left behind.

She found out about Annabeth, and it turns out she was right.

Estelle was born. Percy was the *best* older brother in the entire world. The way his entire face, his scarred, bruised face, melted whenever she was near made something settle in Sally's heart. A family of four, now, they all watched as he became a man. Sally saw him off on his first day for the WSC, and then for SHIELD, and then, after watching the resolve on his face as she told him about the piling up medical bills, she pressed a kiss to his cheek as he got on a plane to go rid the world of a very bad man.

She met the new friends he made; a lovely woman named Nora Johnson, and a charming young man named Wade. She met *the* Tony Stark and Pepper Potts, held a delightful conversation with Colonel Rhodes.

But now, watching her son, she knew none of those introductions had been as weighty as the one she was facing right now.

James Barnes was crouched down, chatting animatedly to Estelle and Lucas, fluent Portuguese easily flowing off his tongue. He, a lot like her own boy, looked sad. Not the surface level kind, that rested in the downturn of a mouth and a slump of the shoulders. No, this was the subtle,

persistent kind that lived in the eyes. The kind that, no matter what, would always be there in some capacity. But, like her son, smiled and laughed overtop it. Estelle and Lucas hung off his arm, delight evident in their gleeful voices as he easily lifted them up.

Sally watched this all happen, and she watched her son.

Written into his face was an expression she had not seen in many, many years.

He was smiling, a purely adoring smile, one that she doubted he even knew he was wearing. And his eyes, his father's dark, stormy eyes, were a shining, soft green, as James Barnes played with his siblings.

Wordlessly, Sally took a place at his side, eyes flickering back between the scene playing out in front of them and him. For a long time, they were both content to say nothing, listening to the laughter and the sounds of Paul grilling in the kitchen, feel the warm wind being let in from outside, the sweet smell of moonlace in the air.

"He fits in here." She finally comments, and Percy startles, like he hadn't even noticed she was there. Sally smiled. *That bad, huh?*

These days, she has to reach up to put a hand on his shoulder. He turns his head towards her, and she runs a gentle thumb over the scars going across his eyes and temples, the one up his jaw and brow, the almost-healed cut running across his cheekbone that she'd cried when he told her how he got.

"A word of advice," Sally says, with the cigarette burns on her arms and the mark from a broken bottle on her collar. "Scars tell us where we've been, *filho*. They don't dictate where we're going."

Her son ducked his head, a smile crawling up onto his face. "Right." He said softly. "I get what you mean."

She pats him on the shoulder, then goes to join Paul in the kitchen, knowing her boy is in good hands.

It was strange to see the SWORD team again.

He knew their real names, now.

Foxglove was actually Ross Bunmi, shaggy, spiky hair that curled around her face. Black cargo pants, chunky lace-up boots, and a too-large sweatshirt characterized her, reddish brown eyes heavily lined with dramatic, dark makeup.

Ace, Daniel Campbell, the one who'd gotten injured at the testimony hearing, was standing in the back of the group, black hair pulled into a small tail at the nape of his neck. He stood almost defensively, drawn into himself. He leaned against the wall for support, looking deceptively normal in his plain tee and jeans. His eyes were obsidian, not leaving Hanover's face.

The one who had come to get him at the Hub, Tremor, or Mal Tanuk, he learned, was wearing a loose knit cardigan and a pair of overalls, scuffed up converse on her feet, bright yellow socks sticking out of them. Her hair was elaborately done in two buns atop her head with the rest of it hanging down to her hips, various clips and colorful pins decorating it. Her face was open and kind-looking, quick to smile at him in greeting.

The one he had to crane his neck up to look at, Echo—Lee Van Keppel, stood with his arms crossed, face in an unamused, flat expression that Bucky had been assured was actually just what he naturally looked like. His hiking boots were the nice, sturdy kind, the same cool-toned brown as his pants, paired with a green, short-sleeved button-up over a gray shirt. His eyes were startlingly pale, and his knuckles were bandaged like he'd hit something.

Archangel, who's name was Bridgette, wore a pale pink sundress and flats, hair in two neatly done french braids, a lavender dye fading out at the tips. They were tied off with a silky ribbon the same color as the butterflies on her dress. Her lashes were long enough to brush her cheeks as she blinked, and her nails were neatly manicured and painted with french tips.

Percy stood in front of them all, cedar-colored pants and a blue sweater. His brow was pinched as Hanover outlined what lied ahead of them, head dipped forward in focus. Bucky was just a bit to his left, listening as intently as he could.

"We've caught 8 cases so far," Hanover continues. "But they're becoming more and more frequent as the weeks past. Whatever is causing it is becoming far more potent, as well."

A dozen reports and a sole, giant map with pins in it rested atop her desk. Bucky scanned every one, noting the symptoms and the possible causes that the patients and described, each more unnatural than the last.

“You want us to find out where it’s coming from?” Mal asked, leaning forward to peer at the map. “There doesn’t seem to be much overlap in potentially contaminated areas.” She notes.

Hanover nods, face pinched. “We’ve come to this conclusion as well. I’m confident your team is the best for the job. We have covers lined out for each of you, as well as residences and backstories.”

A stack of manilla folders sat on the table, and the group fell upon them like vultures. Ross and Mal rushed forward, first, snatching up the two with their names, tearing into them. Dan and Brigitte, in a more restrained manner, went next. Dan took his and backed up, returning to his spot on the wall. Brigitte, hers under an arm, handed Lee’s back to him.

Bucky picked his own up, eyes roving up and down the pages. It wasn’t that outlandish of a cover—Andrew Trejo, a veteran who’d lost his arm to an IED. He got an offer from a Stark medical facility in France—one that specialized in prototypes of prosthetics. In reality, Bucky already *had* one of those prototypes, not only Stark tech but from Wakanda, as well. But it was a fantastic cover, especially since they had Tony on their side. He’d moved to France to undergo testing and fitting for the revolutionary tech, and would remain in the country indefinitely.

His eyes flickered over to the SWORD team. Dan was now standing next to Lee, leaning into his space and pointing at something in his own file. Brigitte and Mal were chatting quietly, and Ross seemed to be reading his for the tenth time.

When he looked over at Percy, the man handed over his own without being asked, not breaking the conversation he’d been holding with Hanover.

“I understand your team has many things to do.” Hanover said. “This will be a long mission. You are under no obligation to accept it.”

“You think we are the best option.” Percy countered.

Hanover inclined her head. “That, I do.”

He hummed.

There were two copies of everything in Percy's folder—one set in braille, the other in regular print. Bucky went straight for the second half, flipping through them easily. He was so caught up in it, he barely noticed when Percy turned to the assembled team and took a vote. Bucky, like the rest of them, were all for it.

The decision was unanimous. "We'll take it." Percy said decisively.

Bucky stared down at his own cover story, then at Percy's.

Charlie Trejo.

Andrew and Charlie Trejo.

He closed the folder, looking over out of the corner of his eye. Percy's face, his strong brow and full lips, the way a few loose strands of hair always fell in his eyes, the way his freckles splattered across his skin like constellations in the night sky.

Percy's laugh, Percy's smile, Percy's warmth.

Yes, Bucky decided. Yes, it would be very easy to pretend to be in incredibly, head-over-heels love with Percy Jackson.

Chapter End Notes

here it is, lads. like 19 pages of epilogue to wrap this up.

bucky's fake barf session being strangely anticlimatic vs the real one being almost exactly the same BECAUSE of the hydra one-

terrible shit always does seem to happen around percy's birthday. and for what.

ACDEC PERCYBUCKY CHAOS!!!

the seven were a bunch of wild ass teenagers stuck together on a boat. they got up to some wild shit. i can feel it in my bones. trying to recreate ambrosia, and have it keep the taste it has for everyone, is absolutely something they would do.

percybucky angst? over. moving onto dumbass bf and too curious to object bf era.

wade: *shovel talk*

ucky, deciding the best course of action is to threaten All The Gods to show his dedication: :)

the gods in the distance: *FEAR*

fr tho he's right, any partner of percy's has to be ready to throw down with olympians at all times

I AM A SALLY JACKSON S T A N

-she adored wade, btw. they have brunch sometimes.

-she also thinksucky '40s formality' barnes is the most respectful young man and approves

-estelle and lucas are delighted by this funky little white man as well

hanover: ok you two need to be in love-

ucky: done and done

hanover:

hanover: for the MISSION

ok so the results are in. the majority of you liked wintersea, but i would like to put up some of my personal favorite submissions so far

-iceberg

-snowtide

-whitesea (like white wolf instead of winter soldier)

-artic ocean

-ice, ice, baby

-sea sergeant

-b u s s y (i actually got multiple of this one-)

-winter sentinel

-winter storm (...blizzard?)

and my personal favorite, by the lovely lilithdcclxxvii,
pames jarnes.

thank you to everyone who read, kudo-ed, and commented. you are the reason i keep writing! love you all <3

sequel is in the works! keep an eye on my insta, @beansofdenim, for the trailer!
plumbing baby. goodbye.

Works inspired by this [one](#)
[Jackson and mrs o'leary bein scary people](#) by [Sallow](#), [dudes bein guys and](#)
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